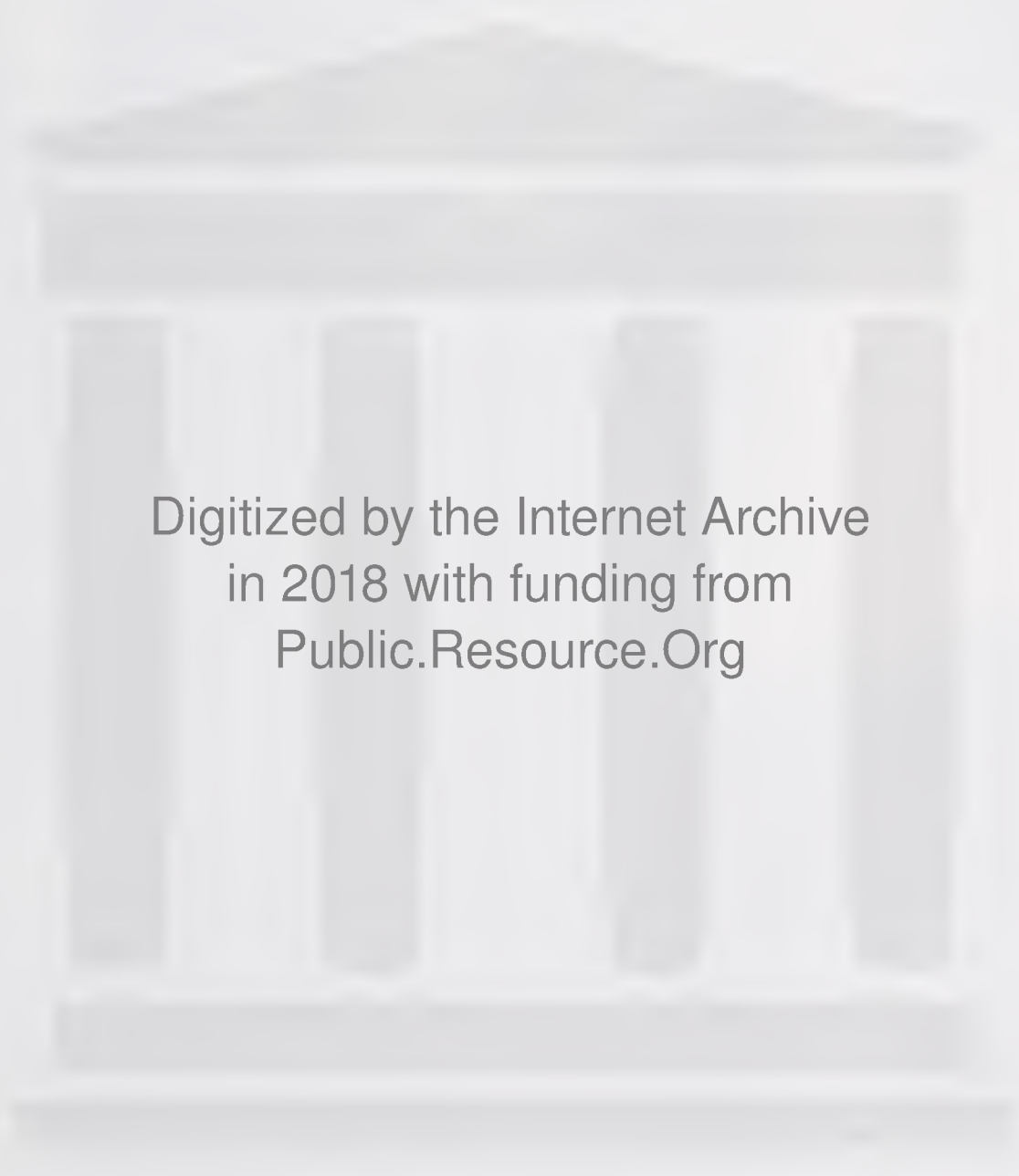


BUILDERS OF MODERN INDIA

RAJA RAMMOHUN ROY

Saumyendranath Tagore

PUBLICATIONS DIVISION



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PUBLICATIONS DIVISION
MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING
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ABOUT THE SERIES

The object of this series is to record, for the present and future generations, the story of the struggle and achievements of the eminent sons and daughters of India who have been mainly instrumental in our national renaissance and the attainment of independence. Except in a few cases, such authoritative biographies have not been available.

The biographies are planned as handy volumes written by knowledgeable people giving a brief account, in simple words, of the life, time and activities of the eminent leaders. They are not intended either to be comprehensive studies or to replace the more elaborate biographies.

CONTENTS

I	The Modern Man	1
II	The Formative Years	8
III	Religious Beliefs	18
IV	Study of English	25
V	Vedanta for the People	28
VI	Controversy with Missionaries	38
VII	Brahma Sabha	49
VIII	Plea For Scientific Education	57
IX	Origin of Bengali Prose	68
X	Social Reforms	72
XI	Economic Affairs	80
XII	Vision of a Free India	96
XIII	Freedom of the Press	102
XIV	Visit to England	108
	Appendix : Letter to the French Foreign Minister	123
	Index	127

The Modern Man

RAMMOHUN ROY (1772-1833) was the creator of the mental climate which conduced to the birth of modern India. He found a country stagnating in the wallow of medievalism and breathed into it a spirit so vital that it transformed the very quality of Indian thought and life. Rammohun's gigantic intellect, enriched by encyclopaedic erudition, informed by rational humanism and a universal outlook, all converged to power synchronously a renaissance and a reformation. The first touched and transmuted every aspect of our intellectual and cultural life, while the second was as far-reaching in its effects as the one that was initiated by Martin Luther. It was not an eulogist, carried away by his enthusiasm, but a sober critic who wrote: "If the labours of Luther in the western world are entitled to be commemorated by the Christians, the Herculean efforts of the individual we allude to (Rammohun Roy) must place him high among the benefactors of the Hindoo portion of mankind."

Some of the qualities of mind and character which marked him out as a giant later in life—his ability to fasten on essentials, rejecting dross, his unimpassioned objectivity and unshakable courage of his convictions—manifested themselves early and we see him, when no older than a boy, questioning the validity of idol-worship.

Rammohun Roy is accepted, by the consent of the learned, as the initiator of comparative religion as a distinct discipline.

His questing mind and a driving passion for the truth led him to a careful study of the source-books of historical religions in the languages in which they had been originally written. Thus Rammohun studied the Koran in Arabic, the Vedas and the Upanishads in Sanskrit, the Old Testament and the Talmud in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek.

A close study of the scriptures of the Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jews and others, no less than his personal realisation, convinced him that at the core of the teachings of all of them was the belief that God is one, without a second, and that He alone is to be worshipped.

The canonical scriptures of historical religions affirmed without exception this monotheistic principle. The differences in the methods of initiation, rituals and symbols were imposed by geographical, climatic and ethnic factors. His genius for synthesis enabled Rammohun to deduce from all of them their universal values and weave them into the doctrine of universalism in religion. This explains why his concept allowed for variations in the historic utterances of each religion and affirmed that in its pristine purity, each religion represented the Truth itself and not a fragment. Shorn of extraneous accretions, each one of them should be left free to maintain its historic continuity and move forward along its own line of growth towards a universal ideal or centre of convergence. He conceived the idea of an Indian church for the “unsectarian worship of One True God”. It is worth emphasising that he thus provided a philosophical basis for communal integration and did not stop short at a mere sentimental appeal to goodwill.

It is to be specially emphasised that the most fundamental aspect of Rammohun’s approach to life was humanism. It subtended even his religious belief. For him, social customs, religious practices or rituals, all these had to stand the acid-test of human welfare or else he would discard them. At a time when even the faintest whisper of non-conformity in matters of religious or social practice was considered a monstrous crime, Rammohun Roy declared:

“My constant reflections on the inconvenient, or rather injurious rites introduced by the peculiar practice of Hindoo idolatry, which, more than any other pagan worship, destroys the texture of society, together with the compassion for my countrymen, have compelled me to use every possible effort to awaken them from their dream of errors.” And yet Rammohun was free from that excessive preoccupation with the metaphysical aspects of religion, which had prompted Martin Luther to condone the inhumanities of the Peasants’ War. His clear-eyed humanist approach is evident in the ardent prayer which concludes his “First appeal to the Christian Public.” He wrote: “May God render religion destructive of differences and dislikes between man and man, and conducive to the peace and union of mankind.”

Rammohun’s appreciation of all that was imperishable in ancient Indian thought and culture was profound, precisely because it was founded on deep study and critical appraisal. While he valued all that was vital in our tradition, he was never its slave. He ruthlessly brushed aside the Hindu tradition of his day that the scriptures were the closed preserve of an esoteric few. By translating the Vedanta and Upanishads into living languages, Bengali and English, he placed the quintessence of the Hindu scriptures before the gaze of a wide public possible. It is of transcendental importance to remember that his English translation of the Hindu scriptures represented the first message of India to the West in modern times. As Max Muller put it, Rammohun was “the first to complete a connected life-current between the East and the West.”

For Rammohun, religion was not a cloistered virtue concerned only with the salvation of the individual, but a force that had to subserve laudable social ends and contribute to the liberation of the spirit of Man. It was inevitable, therefore, that he should turn to the study of social practices and institutions with the same meticulous care as he had the scriptures. With the detached discernment of a scientist, he isolated the cancerous over-growths in the society of his day and crusaded for their removal.

The logical progression of Rammohun's universalism in religion was his international outlook in regard to state polity. A pointer to his attitude is provided in his own words when he wrote: "Not religion only, but unbiased commonsense as well as the accurate deductions of scientific research lead to the conclusion that all mankind are one great family." Thus it was that he was the first in the whole world of man to conceive of a world government and urge the setting up of a world body in which international disputes could be resolved by debate.

Rammohun's unbounded sympathy for the struggle for freedom and democracy everywhere is a matter of record and not opinion. It was reflected alike in the manner in which he hailed the French Revolution, the introduction of constitutional governments in Spain and Portugal, the rising of the South American colonies against the authority of Spain, his unequivocal support to the struggle for freedom of the Greeks against the Turks and the Irish against British occupation and his anguish at the failure of the uprising of the Neapolitans against the Bourbon King of Naples. Nor do these exhaust the examples of his unerring historical judgment.

While he himself was steeped in oriental learning and culture, he bent his efforts towards the introduction of European education, emphasizing the need for the study of mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry, anatomy and other useful sciences. His abhorrence of the British rule at one stage did not hide from his view the immeasurable gains that would accrue to India through the impact of the West. Unyielding in his opposition to the ignorant traducers of India's true cultural heritage, he was sympathetic to all that was best in western thought and culture. In fact, he was the first man in Asia whose mind was lit up by the light of Western thought and the resurgent spirit of humanism. He was the tallest peak which was the first to catch the light of the Age of Illumination in Europe.

4 Today, the mention of Rammohun Roy evokes different images in different people, depending on their inclination, understanding,

prejudice and even special interests. Thus some have extolled his role as a religious reformer, while others have chosen to portray him as a crusader, above all, for social reforms and the emancipation of women. Benighted partisanship has led official political party scribes in recent times to gloss over the historical fact that he was the first champion of political, economic and constitutional progress of India. It is hardly necessary to add that such deliberate detractions have had little effect on students of history gifted with discernment. The objective historical viewpoint in this regard is exemplified by the writings of Dr. Percival Spear, acknowledged as one of the ablest writers on modern Indian history. Pointing out that Rammohun had created a basis for social reforms and Indian democracy within the Hindu septem of thought, Dr. Spear says these were the “foundations on which Mahatma Gandhi was later to build so imposing a structure”. Nor is public amnesia confined to Rammohun’s political role. The present day generation hardly remembers that he was the founder of the Indian press, the maker of modern Bengali prose and the initiator of educational reforms that had profound influence on the course of India’s history.

In this context, one cannot do better than to quote Sir R. Venkata Ratnam who said: “Rammohun Roy was distinctly different from the other great men of India before his day. In range of vision, in reach of sympathy, in versatility of power, in variety of activities, in co-ordination of interests and in coalescence of ideas-in fine, as realising an allround, all-receptive life in its manifold fullness, Rammohun Roy is a unique figure in the history of India, if not in the annals of the race.”

One reason for a fragmentary view of Rammohun in the public mind is perhaps to be found in the unbelievable range of his interests, study and activity, as also his outstanding achievements in widely varied fields of endeavour. “Comprehensive beyond comparison was the Raja’s view of a full life.” It is true that each one of his achievements was lofty enough to ensure for him imperishable fame, but to single out any of them for special emphasis would be to miss the wood for the trees.

For Raminohun, the man was greater than all his deeds. In one mighty sweep, his mind took in the dim past, the pressing present, the conflict of cultures and faiths, the claims of tradition and the need for change, the urgings of intuition and the voice of reason and reconciled them all in a grand design, a total configuration. It is in this synthetic perception of reality that he stands alone.

No one in his own day, and few in the two hundred years since, approached Rammohun in his unerring sense of history. No one saw as clearly as he did that the past was the unalterable background of human life. To ignore tradition altogether was to forego historical perspective. To regard historical conditions to be as permanent as natural laws, above the changes imposed by the flow of time, was to miss the meaning of life. Unthinking defiance of tradition could not be equated with progress while uncritical acceptance tended to reduce a great tradition to meaningless formalism. The touchstone of reason alone could show what was of value in tradition.

Some of Rammohun's ideas were realized during his lifetime, others afterwards. Much of those that were not, have lost none of their force and relevance. The Rev. C. F. Andrews, speaking at the Indian Students Union in London many years ago, said: "He was always far ahead of his own times and his greatest thoughts have not yet found their full accomplishment in the history of India and the modern world." Andrews was careful to add that some of the greatest of Rammohun's aspirations were nearer realization at the time of Rammohun's death, than a hundred years later. If the chances of his ideas being implemented are no brighter today, it is because they were not only much in advance of his own age, but also of our own.

It requires no great reaches of the mind to understand that the ideas on social or religious reforms which seem commonplace today must have appeared ultra-radical in the eyes of Rammohun's

contemporaries. This is evidenced by the vicious opposition which he had to overcome at every step and turn. To appreciate the extent of his task and comprehend even dimly how essentially modern his whole outlook was, one must call to mind the state of the Indian society in his days.

The Formative Years

IN 1765, SHAH ALAM II, the Emperor of Delhi, granted the charter of the Dewani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to the East India Company. This placed the imprimatur on the growing political might of a private trading company. Although all the signs and portents of the impending doom of Mughal power had become apparent by then, the British hesitated to exercise political power directly. Instead, they had recourse to expedients which kept up the fiction of the paramountcy of the Emperor as well as of the phantom Nawabs.

Under this so-called “double government” the British possessed the substance of power and the Emperor the title to it. Responsible to no one, the Emperor and the Company between them shared the proceeds of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The first major step towards removing the ambivalence in the power structure was taken when the Company finally decided to stand forth as Dewan in 1772, the year of Rammohun’s birth.

Begun much earlier, the process of decay, eating into the vitals of Indian society, was accelerated by the unbridled communal policy pursued by Aurangzeb. The financing of military expeditions against the Marathas had emptied the coffers of the Mughal Court, with the result that seats of learning, both Hindu and Muslim, were languishing, and roads, canals and other public works were in a woeful state of disrepair. The countryside was totally exhausted. Bereft of political hope, the Hindu society was submerged in despair. Fear cast its long shadow over the entire community which withdrew

within itself and lived in the past. The unifying force of *Brahmavad* had yielded place to the divisive tendencies of cults, specially those that were based on fear.

The main intellectual pursuit was a sterile dissection of religious commentaries. The place of *acharyas* or preceptors was taken by priests whose vested interests demanded the perpetuation of the crassest of superstitions. Self-inflicted injuries became the badge of devotion, and child sacrifice and burning of widows acts of piety. The pervasive morbidity reflected itself in literature which had degenerated to the lowest depths of ribaldry. Hindu society revolved within old cultural grooves. The Muslim society was in an equally perilous state. During the first half of the eighteenth century, a major source of inspiration of the Muslim society, Persian culture, had virtually dried up with the collapse of the Safavid Empire. Not only did the Persians themselves lose confidence in themselves, but the aggressive quality and contagious nature of their culture were also gone. Receiving no cultural impulse from outside, the Muslims were unable to transmit any to the country, even though all those who wanted to find a place *in* the sun still learned Persian. Since politics and society were closely connected in Islamic thought, the political eclipse of the Mughals produced a shattering effect on the entire Muslim society. The Muslims had pinned their faith on the Emperor and the Emperor had now fallen. Accustomed to monopolizing high offices by virtue of their religion, the Muslim gentry, when it became dispossessed, had nothing to fall back upon. There was none in the Muslim society in the declining years of the Mughal rule who could himself take the emerging new order.

In sum, every limb of society was struck by palsy. Scarcely a noble deed would stir the stagnant pool that was Indian Society or a great thought light up the deepening gloom. This was the state of the country when India's first modern man, Raja Rammohun Roy was born at Radhanagar in 1772. Radhanagar, adjacent to Khanakul-Krishna Nagar, is now in the Hoogly District, but was then encompassed within the Burdwan District.

The Roys were Brahmins of the highest order (Kulins) and we have it on the authority of a brief autobiographical note prepared by Rammohun at the request of an English friend that their immediate ancestors had left the traditional Brahminical profession about a hundred and fifty years earlier for “wordly pursuits” in the service of the Mughal princes. The note was published after Roy’s death in the *Athenaeum* on October 5, 1833. In an aside on the notorious fickleness of princely favour bestowed on their servants, Rammohun wrote that the fate of his forefathers, in their pursuit of fortune, ran the usual course reserved for courtiers. They were elated by success, and at other times were miserable through disappointment. Among those who attained high positions of trust and responsibility under the Mohammedan Governors of Murshidabad was his grandfather, Braja Binod Roy. He rose to become Chief of different districts at different times during the rule of Muhobad Jung, as Nawab of Murshidabad. Rammohun’s father, Ramkanta “was a man of property-the revenue of which was lakhs of rupees”. References to Ramkanta in the correspondence exchanged between the Collector of Burdwan and the Board of Revenue described him as “the most respectable man in the district”.

In contrast to the ancestors from his paternal side, Roy’s maternal ancestors had adhered to the “sacerdotal order by profession and a life of religious observance and devotion, preferring peace and tranquility to the excitement of ambition and all the allurements of worldly grandeur”. It is of more than passing interest to note that the deity of the family of Roy’s father was Vishnu, while that of his mother was Shiva. Thus the man who was to become the very embodiment of a composite, synthetic culture inherited from his family lineage the tradition of two different sects of Hinduism.

The long association of the family with the Mughal court, dating back to five generations, naturally steeped the Roys in Islamic culture. This did little to lessen their fervid faith in Hinduism.

Rammohun's father and mother were devout Hindus and so was he, till a deep study of the historical religions induced skepticism in him in regard to the practices of popular Hinduism.

His earliest education, following the usual practice in his days, began at home at first and then in the village school or *pathshala*. This was revealed among others by Kishori Chand Mitra in an article published in the *Calcutta Review* in December, 1845. Mitra wrote: "Rammohun received the first elements of native education at home in accordance with the system, which obtains universally among the upper classes of the native society, initiating the children into the mysteries of *Subhankar* (Arithmetic)."

The curriculum of the pathshalas, one of which Rammohun attended, was confined to elementary arithmetic and the practice of writing business letters in the native tongue. Such Brahmin students as wished to study Sanskrit would graduate to Chatuspathis or Tols, and boys from well-to-do families, with an eye on careers in public service would emigrate to a *maktab* to study Persian and Arabic, the former still retaining its status as court language. In his later life, Rammohun was to put in tireless efforts for the removal of this narrow, circumscribed apology for an educational system and its replacement by a broad-based, balanced and modern system with special emphasis on the study of science. Ramkanta, understandably anxious to ensure for his son a bright career, engaged a Maulvi to teach him Persian. Rammohun himself throws an interesting sidelight on this in his autobiographical note in these words: "In conformity with the usage of my paternal race, and the wish of my father, I studied the Persian and Arabic languages, these being accomplishments indispensable to those who attached themselves to the courts of Mohammedan Princes; and agreeable to the usage of my maternal relations, I devoted myself to the study of Sanskrit, and the theological literature, law and religion."

Shortly after his preparatory tuition at home, Rammohun was sent to Patna, then a famed centre of Persian and Arabic learning

and Islamic culture to study Arabic and Persian. Born at a place where Sanskritic culture flourished, nurtured in a home where Hindu and Islamic culture both had a place, Rammohun seemed now to be led by inexorable fate to the study of another religion and culture, as yet another step in preparing himself for the task that destiny seemed to have pre-ordained for him.

The foundations of Rammohun's study of Persian and Arabic were laid at Patna. Before long, he became as versed in the wisdom of the Koran, the sixty three schools of Mohammedan theology and Mohammedan law as any erudite maulvi. His studies were by no means confined to the Koran, Islamic theology and law. In the inimitable language of Dr. Brajendra Nath Seal, "It was Islamic culture, the culture of Baghdad and Bassora (Basra), filtered through an Indian Madrassa, that first woke the boy's (Rammohun) mind. Euclidean Geometry, the categories of Porphyry's Logic through the Arabic "Mantiq", lyrical raptures of Persian 'Ghazals' felt in the blood, though but dimly comprehended at the time, first opened his mind's eye. And thus did Aflatun (Plato) and Aristu (Aristotle) of Old Greece visit the Brahmin boy in an Arabic guise".

Although the core of Islamic religious thought had a profound and lasting influence on him, the Raja was drawn by special affinity towards the writings of the Sufi school of Mohammedan philosophers and more particularly the Mohammedan unitarians, the Muabidins and the Muslim rationalists, the Mutazalis. The last was a movement started in the 8th century A.D. at Basra by Wasil B. Ata and Amir B. Ubaid. At one stage the movement had spread far and wide in the Muslim world. Parallel to the school of Basra, a Mutazila school was founded in Baghdad. This school, which vehemently opposed the doctrine of uncreated Koran, was, persecuted by Harun-al-Rashid. The tenets of the Mutazila school were also propagated in Syria, Egypt and in Spain. The reasons for Roy's abiding interest in the writings of the Mutazila philosophers are to be found in the essentially rational approach of the school.

The fundamental doctrines of Mutazila enjoined the strictest adherence to monotheism and the disavowal of every shade of dualism. They repudiated the idea that there was any resemblance between God and His creatures, and along with it beliefs in anthropomorphism and *avatarvad*. Holding that the Koran was created by man, the Mutazilas maintained that all human acts spring from man's free will. Further, that those communities which had not derived divine scriptures from God, could also acquire wisdom and perform their duty according to their own light.

It is small wonder that the monotheistic spirit of Islam shone brightly through the philosophical writings of Roy. Commenting on this, Mrs. Shams-un-Nahar Mahmud, in her speech in Bengali at the Rammohun Centenary said that Roy had drawn from Islam all that was its very essence, all that was imperishable. While it was true that Roy had derived much from Islamic culture, it was equally true that he also re-discovered Islam. Mrs. Mahmud added that this placed him among the leaders of modern Muslims.

The profound influence of Islamic culture on Roy was attested to, among others, by his biographer, Miss Sophia Dobson Collett. In her authoritative book entitled "Life and letters of Rammohun Roy", she pointed out that Roy's deep studies at a formative age "tended inevitably towards the disintegration of his earliest religious beliefs which had been very fervent". The outcome was characteristic. In his autobiographical sketch, Roy says, "When about the age of sixteen, I composed a manuscript calling in question the validity of the idolatrous system of Hindus. This, together with my known sentiments on the subject, having produced a coolness between me and my immediate kindred, I proceeded on my travel and passed through different countries, chiefly within, but some beyond the bounds of Hindustan".

Though the manuscript, which cannot now be traced, was the immediate cause for Roy's expulsion from his father's house, the feeling of estrangement between father and son had grown earlier.

Dr. Lant Carpenter, in his book on Rammohun published in 1833 says: “Without disputing the authority of his father, he often sought from the father the reason of the latter’s faith in idolatry.” As was to be expected, he obtained no satisfaction and finally decided to give up the shelter of the paternal roof. Ramkanta’s action in banishing his son for writing a tract on the folly of idolatry would seem inexplicably harsh, if it is forgotten that the father was the product of an age which had sanctified custom, in which superstition had become sacrosanct and conformity the cardinal virtue. To question even in a whisper the merest detail of the orthodox religious belief was to invite the wrath of a vengeful society upon one’s head.

Rammohun’s travels took him far and wide. In his own words, he “passed through different countries, chiefly within, but some beyond the bounds of Hindustan”. The widely-held belief, some dissenters notwithstanding, is that his travels took him to Tibet. Though he does not mention Tibet by name, Rammohun wrote in his book *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahiddin* that he had sojourned in the remotest part of the world, in the plains as well as the mountainous regions. Dr. Lant Carpenter, who is much more specific on this point writes that Rammohun travelled “for a time in Tibet that he might see another form of religious faith”. The memoirs of Rammohun by the Rev. K. S. Macdonald, published in Calcutta in 1879 lend further credence to the view that Rammohun did visit Tibet. Macdonald points out that while in Patna he must have learnt a good deal about Buddhism, as also of the religious practices of the aboriginal tribes inhabiting the hills of central and southern India and the slopes of the Himalayas. In Tibet, he spent two or three years disputing daily with the worshippers of the living Lama.

After his travels, covering a period of three or four years, Rammohun settled down in Varanasi, the seat of Sanskritic culture and learning. It was here that he began his devoted study of Sanskrit, which gave him the key to the treasures of his inherited Brahmanic culture. It is acknowledged on all sides that he became a master of

the whole Brahminic literature, with the exception of Vedic Samhitas. Evidence is not wanting to show that he was an assiduous student of Hindu *Smriti* including law, jurisprudence and social institutions. In addition, he had mastered the *Darshanas* or the systems of philosophy including *Mimangsha* as well as the entire body of religious literature including the *Brahmanas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas* and the *Tantras*. Rammohun's writings and speeches in his later life point unerringly to the fact that it was the *Upanishads*, the *Bramha Sutras* with Sankara's commentaries and the *Gita*, i.e. the three *Vedanta Sastras* that influenced him most in shaping his personal religion and philosophy of life.

It will not be out of place to trace Rammohun's thought process which finally shaped his philosophy of universalism. Besides, such an exposition would go a long way in understanding his precise position and role in regard to religious and social reforms. As a boy, Rammohun's faith in popular Hinduism was as unshakable as it was blind. It is well-known that he would not bite a morsel of food before first going through the rituals enjoined upon a Brahmin. He was roused from his "dogmatic slumber" first by the impact of Islamic monotheism and subsequently by the monism of Vedanta. Dogmatism gave way to scepticism, and at one stage he was sceptic about the scriptures. Commenting on this, Dr. Brajendra Nath Seal says: "He became sceptically minded as to the claims of all *Sastras* and all historical religions. A deeper study of the Vedanta brought him back to a theistic view of the world."

If modern readers are quick to discern the working of the dialectical process here, they would do well to remember that it also represents the methods of *Mimangsha*. The path to truth, according to the methodology of *Mimangsha* begins with the study of the scriptures. This obviously is the starting point—the thesis. Doubt or scepticism must be counterpoised against this, leading to a proper evaluation of the thesis. Finally, evaluation would point to correct conclusion. Even a superficial acquaintance with Rammohun's thought, speech or writing would bring home the fact that this was

essentially the method that he would invariably adopt to arrive at his conclusions, no matter what the subject of his study was.

It needs to be emphasised that Rammohun did not reject the authority of the Shastras, though he insisted that the teachings of the Shastras should be accepted only after examination. A true rationalist, he maintained that scriptures were not the ultimate authority; man's highest realization was built not on metaphysical or supernatural foundations, but on his own consciousness.

The Shastras are replete with passages which sustain a rationalist approach to religion. A few examples will suffice. For instance, *Yoga-Vashist* says: "If a child says something reasonable, it is good. But even if Brahma himself says something which is unreasonable, it should be discarded as straw."

According to the Upanishads, "the senses, the mind and intellect—these are the means to the realization of Brahma". The Upanishads never laid down that "Brahma-tattwa" or the realization of God was beyond the reach of cognition and feeling and could only be achieved through the authority of the Shastras or supernatural agencies.

The Vedanta too acknowledges the supremacy of the mind or reasoning in the realization of Brahma when it avers that it is the evidence of birth and enquiry into the causes of birth that has established the concept of the absolute.

One need not stretch a point to say that Rammohun, a profound scholar of the Hindu Shastras, was fully familiar with these ideas or that his thinking was in consonance with the spirit of the Shastras.

In 1794, Rammohun's stay in Varanasi came to an end. Giving the reason for this, he says in his autobiographical note: "My father recalled and restored me to his favour." This is the period when he first made his acquaintance with Europeans and made himself familiar with their laws and forms of government. Contacts with the Europeans disabused his mind of the strong feelings he formerly

had about them. The change in his views was recorded in the autobiographical note in these words : “I gave up my prejudices against them (Europeans) and became inclined to their favour, feeling persuaded that their rule, though a foreign yoke, would lead more speedily and surely to the amelioration of the native inhabitants. I enjoyed the confidence of several of them even in their public capacity. My continued controversies with the Brahmins on the subject of their idolatry and superstitions, and my interference with their custom of burning widows and other pernicious practices, revived and increased their animosity against me with renewed force, and through their influence with my family, my father was again obliged to withdraw his countenance openly though his limited pecuniary support was still continued to me.”

Religious Beliefs

ALTHOUGH THERE might have been an interruption in intensive studies which had all along marked Rammohun's life before his return to his paternal home, there was no letup in his crusade against social inequity and oppression. Before long, events took a new turn for him. In 1800, the Fort William College in Calcutta was inaugurated, with the noted educationist and Seerampore missionary, William Carey, as Principal. Set up to teach Oriental languages to East India Company civilians, the college soon became the meeting ground of European and Indian scholars. To Rammohun, ever thirsting for knowledge, the college presented a wonderful opportunity. He lost no time in forming a close association with the scholars who worked in the institution, particularly the Chief Munshi in Persian. It was at Fort William College that he met John Digby in 1801. Their subsequent association for several years was to exert the profoundest influence on his life and work.

Another civilian whom Rammohun had met at about the same time was Thomas Woodforde. Evidence suggests that Rammohun's service career with the East India Company began as Dewan under Woodforde, when the latter was acting Collector of Dacca Jabalpur District (now known as Faridpur).

A year after his father passed away in 1803, Rammohun joined Woodforde in Murshidabad where the latter was posted as Registrar of the Court of Appeal. In the same year, Rammohun's first major work, *Tuhfat-Ul-Muwahiddin*, or "A gift to the Believers in the One God" was published. With the introduction written in Arabic

and the text in Persian, the book represented the first broadside in the battle against entrenched orthodoxy.

Deploring the falsehood that besmirched the face of religions, the book brought out the general unity of thought among all mankind in regard to the belief in the existence of the One Being. Differences arose when men sought to endow that Being with particular attributes. The roots of sectarianism and bigotry lay there. Further, Rammohun emphasised that sectarianism was born of error and was “inconsistent with the wisdom and mercy of the great, generous and disinterested creator”. In an accent which was astonishingly modern, he wrote:

“I travelled in the remotest parts of the world, in plains as well as in hilly lands, and I found the inhabitants thereof agreeing generally in believing in the existence of One Being who is the source of creation and the governor of it, and disagreeing in giving peculiar attributes to that Being and in holding different creeds consisting of the doctrines of religion and precepts of Haram (forbidden) and Halal (legal). From this induction it has been known to me that turning generally towards One Eternal Being is like a natural tendency in human beings and is common to all individuals of mankind equally. And the inclination of each sect of mankind to a particular God or Gods holding certain special attributes, and to some peculiar forms of worship or devotion is an excrescent quality grown in mankind by habit and training. Some of these sectarians are ready to confute the creeds of others owing to a disagreement with them, believing in the truth of sayings of their predecessors; while those predecessors also like other men were liable to commit sins and mistakes. Hence either all these sectarians (in pretending the truth of their own religion) are true or false. In the former case, the two contradictories come together, and in the latter case, either falsehood is to be imputed to a certain religion particularly or commonly to all.”

Thus, it was human agency, utilizing tradition and supernaturalism to subserve its own ends that not only subverts the universality of historical religions, but impels zealots of our faith “to indulge in nameless cruelties” on the followers of another.

Making an impassioned plea for a rational approach to religion, Rammohun asserted:

“Happy is the time of those persons who are apt to make a distinction between the conditions which are found in individuals owing to habit and frequent association, and these intrinsic qualities which are the results of the cravings of nature in species and individuals and try their utmost to make an enquiry into the truth and falsehood of the different principles of religion held by different people, unbiased in favour of anyone, and scrutinise even those propositions which are admitted by all without looking into the position of those persons by whom they have been asserted.”

Where a rational approach was wanting, men were led into the *cul de sac* of blind belief. In a reasoned exposure of ritualism, the handmaid of blind faith, Rammohun wrote that “through the influence of habit and custom and blindness to the enquiry into the sequence between the cause and effect, they believe the bathing in a river and worshipping a tree or being a monk and purchasing forgiveness from the high priests etc. (according to the peculiarities of different religions) to be the cause of salvation and purification from sins of a whole life. And they think that this purification is the effect of those objects of their beliefs and the miracle of their priests and not the result of their own beliefs and whims, while these do not produce any effect on those who do not agree with them in those beliefs. Had there been any real effect of these imaginary things, it must have been common to all nations of different persuasions and should not have been confined to one particular nation’s beliefs and habits. For although the degree of the strength of effect varies according to the different capacities of persons subject to it, yet it is not dependent upon belief of a

certain believer. Do you not see that if a poison be taken by anyone in the belief that it is a sweetmeat, it must produce its effects on the eater and kill him”.

But man, being a rational being, was inherently capable of reasoning. And in a rational approach lay his salvation. Thus “there is always an innate faculty existing in the nature of mankind that in case any person of sound mind, before or after assuming the doctrines of any religion, makes an enquiry into the nature of the principles of religious doctrines, primary or secondary, laid down by different nations, without partiality and with a sense of justice, there is a strong hope that he will be able to distinguish the truth from untruth, and the true propositions from the fallacious ones, and he at last, becoming free from the useless restraints of religion, which sometimes become sources of prejudice of one against another and causes of physical and natural troubles, will turn to the One Being who is the fountain of the harmonious organization of the universe, and will pay attention to the good of the society.”

Throughout *Tuhfat*, there is perfervid assertion of faith in monotheism and an equally firm rejection of a whole medley of superstitious beliefs from supernaturalism to *avatarvad*. The following is a typical passage.

“It is customary with common people labouring under whims that when they see any act or thing done or found beyond their power of comprehension, or for which they cannot make out any obvious cause, they ascribe it to supernatural power or miracle. The secret lies in this, that in this world where things are mutually related to one another by a sequent relation of cause and effect, the existence of everything depends upon a certain cause and condition, so that if we take into consideration the remote causes, we may see that in the existence of anyone thing in nature, the whole universe is connected. But when for want of experience and through the influence of whims, the cause of a thing remains

hidden to anyone, another person having found it a good opportunity for achieving his object ascribes it to his own supernatural power and thereby attracts people to him. Inductive reason only may be a sufficient safeguard for intelligent people, against being deceived by such supernatural works. The utmost which we can say on this matter is that in some instances, notwithstanding a keen and penetrative discretion, the cause of some wonderful things remains unknown to some people. In such cases, we ought to have recourse to our own intuition and put it to the following query, viz., whether it is compatible with reason to be convinced of our own inability to understand the cause or to attribute it to some impossible agency inconsistent with the law of nature. It is to be wondered at, that although people in wordly transactions, without knowing a certain connection of one with another, do not believe the one is the cause and the other the effect, yet when there is influence of religion and faith, they do not hesitate to call one the cause and the other the effect, notwithstanding the absence of any connection or sequence between the two. For instance, the removal of a calamity by the effect of *duas* or certain prayers or getting recovery from disease by the effect of certain charms, amulets, etc. They sometimes have a profound knowledge of logic to argue that it is not impossible for the power of that Omnipotent Creator who has brought the whole universe into existence from perfect non-entity that He should unite life with the bodies of the dead a second time or give to earthly bodies the property of light or the power of air to travel at a great distance within a short time. But this argument does not prove anything but probability of occurrence of such things while they have to prove real occurrence of miracles of their ancient religious leaders and the modern *Mujtahids* or the doctors of religion.”

22 Rammohun marshalled unanswerable arguments to demonstrate the manifestly untenable position of those who believed

in *avatars* or prophets or held that God's guidance was made known through the agency of prophets. He wrote: "Some people argue in this way that the Almighty Creator has opened the way of guidance to mortal beings through the mediums of prophets or leaders of religions. This is evidently futile, because the same people believed that the existence of all things in creation, whether good or bad, is connected with the Great Creator without any intermediary agency and that the secondary causes are all the medium and conditions of their existence. Hence it is to be seen whether the sending of prophets and revelation to them from God, are immediately from God or through intermediate agency. In the first case, there is no necessity of an intermediate agency for guidance to salvation, and there does not seem any necessity of instrumentality of prophets and revelations. And in the second case, there would be a series of intermediate agencies which would not conclude to any end. Hence the advent of prophets and revelation, like other things in nature, depend upon external causes without reference to God, *i.e.* they depend upon the invention of an inventor."

As for miracles, which obviously implied the temporary suspension or transgression of natural laws, Rammohun said: "It is an admitted fact that the Creator has no power to create impossible things, for instance co-partnership with God or non-existence of God or existence of two contradictories etc." Rammohun makes a distinction between a tradition which produces positive belief and a tradition assumed by the followers of religions. He writes: "According to the followers of religions, tradition is a report coming down from a certain class of people to whom falsehood of that report cannot be imputed but whether such a class of people existed in the ancient times, is not known to the people of the present time through the medium of external senses or experience; rather it is quite obscure and doubtful. Besides, a great contradiction is found in affirmation and negation of prophecy and other good attributes of the leaders of different religions and these contradictory reports are proved by traditions. Therefore, in taking for granted the truth

of the reports of each party, there would be admitting two contradictions.”

As an epitome of his religious and philosophical belief, *Tuhfat-Ul-Muwahiddin* is of perennial interest. Its overriding importance lies in the fact that its publication marked the end of the long night of medievalism and the dawn of a new age. It was not a sterile religious commentary in the tradition of the schoolmen of the Middle Ages, but a review of the very basis of the prevailing religious beliefs. Reason was crowned where superstition reigned and the welfare of man was held up as the true aim of religion. *Tuhfat* spoke in a language which had never been heard before.

Study of English

SHORTLY AFTER the publication of *Tuhfat*, Rammohun's stay in Murshidabad came to an end. In August 1805, John Woodforde resigned his post and Rammohun followed suit. His next assignment saw him in Ramgarh, serving as *Munshi* under Digby. This association which continued unbroken for nine years, until Digby's retirement in 1814, had profound influence on Rammohun's life. After a series of transfers from Ramgarh to Jessore and Bhagalpur, Digby and Rammohun finally went to Rangpur in 1809.

After he joined Digby, Rammohun applied his undoubted linguistic talents to the mastery of English. It should be said to the eternal credit of Digby that, himself an educated person, he treated Rammohun not as a subordinate but an equal and afforded him every opportunity not only to study English but also the political and economic developments of Europe and America of the time. Testifying to his diligence in the study of English and the political developments in Europe, Digby wrote: "By perusing all my public correspondence with diligence and attention, as well as by corresponding and conversing with European gentlemen, he acquired so correct a knowledge of the English language as to be enabled to write and speak it with considerable accuracy. He was also in the constant habit of reading English newspapers, of which the continental politics chiefly interested him."

Noteworthy among many of those who had been moved to pay tributes to the felicity with which Rammohun used the English

language were Jeremy Bentham, the celebrated English philosopher and James Silk-Buckingham, Editor of the *Calcutta Journal*. Writing to a fellow-editor of a London journal, Buckingham recorded how agreeably surprised he was at the “unparalleled accuracy of his (Rammohun’s) language, never having before heard any foreigner of Asiatic birth speak so well, and esteeming his fine choice of words as worthy of imitation even of Englishmen.” Continuing in the same vein, Buckingham added: “I was delighted and surprised at his perfection in this tongue. In English, he is competent to converse freely on the most abstruse subjects and to argue more closely and coherently than most men that I know.”

Jeremy Bentham, greatly impressed by reading Rammohun’s works in English wrote to the author thus: “Your works are made known to me by a book in which I read a style, which but for the name of a Hindu, I should certainly have ascribed to the pen of a superiorly educated and instructed Englishman.” In the body of the same letter, Bentham had commended to Rammohun James Mill’s book on Indian History. In so doing, however, Bentham observed that when it came to style, he wished he could “with truth and sincerity” pronounce Mill’s to be equal to that of Rammohun’s.

Rammohun’s proficiency in English not only added another bright feather to his linguistic cap, already heavy with gorgeous plumage, but opened up before him the wondrous world of Western thought and culture. “His aim”, as Dr. Brajendra Nath Seal put it, was to study “the New Learning from the West and the social, political and scientific culture embodied in it.” He read with avid interest the literature of empirical philosophy and scientific thought from Bacon to Locke and Newton; the writings of political thinkers like Montesque, Blackstone, Bentham and Tom Paine and the representative writers of the Age of Illumination such as Voltaire and Volney, Gibbon and Hume. Well might Rammohun have said with Bacon that he took all knowledge to be his province. And his wide reading induced in him the spirit of rationalism in religion and liberty in politics. He was inspired by the Age of Illumination that had lit up the intellectual sky of Europe.

Attempts at giving concrete shape to the political ideas which he knew had stirred the western world inevitably gripped his attention and Rammohun followed with lively interest the fortunes of the American Independence movement and the First French Revolution.

While at Rangpur, he took a small step towards the propagation of some of his ideas. At the same time, it enabled the development and sharpening of his polemical power. Rammohun organized an informal club which met every evening at his own residence.

Rangpur at the time was “a place of considerable resort” and men of different communities, including Marwaris who were Jains by faith, would attend these meetings to discuss fundamental religious questions, specially the “untenableness of idolatry.” A measure of the success of these meetings was the sharp reaction of the orthodox circles. The attack of the orthodox was spear-headed by Gowri Kanta Bhattacharya, a scholar in Persian and Sanskrit. In a book entitled “Gyananjan” published from Calcutta, Bhattacharya attacked Rammohun for propagating views which in orthodox eyes amounted to heresy.

In retrospect, it becomes quite clear that for Rammohun the entire period from the time he went to Patna to the time he left Rangpur in 1814, as Digby left for England on retirement, was one of intense preparation for the work that he was called to perform by his appointed destiny.

The strands that went into the making of the wondrous web that was Rammohun’s mind represented all that was the very essence of Semetic culture in both the Hebraic and Arabic tradition, Hindu culture as embodied in Vedanta and the Upanishad, as well as the New Learning from the West based on scientific, economic and utilitarian thought, as distinguished from the Jewish and Greco-Roman heritage. He culled the rarest gems of thought from the old world and the new to equip himself for the fulfillment of his mission of transforming India to the core.

Vedanta for the People

IN THE sixteen crowded years between 1814 when he finally settled down in Calcutta to his departure for England in 1830, Rammohun accomplished so much in so many different directions that a whole team of talented men, were they to accomplish half as much, would have every reason to be proud.

Rammohun engaged his whole powerful personality in everything he undertook—from an unrelenting crusade against religious bigotry and the social evils that they produced to active agitation for preserving the freedom of the press and for the introduction of educational, economic and political reforms. In addition, he wrote voluminously on all these widely varied subjects, besides translating many of the Upanishads in Bengali and English.

No one who is acquainted with Rammohun Roy's work will differ from Professor Sylvain Levi's remarks that he "showed his special genius in a line where Indians today are the weakest, in translating into practice, by the force of will, the dictates of idealism."

The first major step that Rammohun took in Calcutta towards the fulfilment of his ideal was to set up the Atmiya Sabha in 1815. This was at once a brains-trust, a forum for free discussions on fundamental religious issues and a platform for agitation against such social evils as the Suttee, Kulinism and the caste system. It also lent powerful support to widow-remarriage and the right of Hindu women to the property of their fathers or husbands. It was the spearhead in the fight for religious reforms.

Rammohun Roy's activities in regard to religious and social reforms as also the debates at his informal group meetings at Rangpur had produced shockwaves that hit Calcutta long before his arrival in 1814. While the orthodox were filled with alarm, the progressive section, though a microscopic minority gave him its enthusiastic applause. His arrival in the city was thus the signal for many men of stature and character to rally to his side. The group included such eminent men as Dwarka Nath Tagore, Brindaban Mitra, Braja Mohan Mazumdar, Nilratan Haldar, Gopi Mohan Tagore and Nanda Kishore Bosh. Jointly and severally, they made signal contribution towards furthering the cause that Rammohun espoused, and they themselves had made their own.

Recital of the Vedas and exposition of the text were a major feature of the activities of the Atmiya Sabha, though discussions on important social problems also figured on the agenda of the organization.

It is worth emphasising that the membership of the Sabha was by no means confined to any particular community nor participation in debates limited only to members. In fact, any member of the public was welcomed to join in the discussions. What is more, it was customary for the Sabha to reply to those who wrote to raise serious questions on religious or social matters. Almost always, it fell to Rammohun to reply to such correspondence from pandits learned in the Shastras. Actually, exchange of such correspondence led to the opening of a new avenue for Rammohun for the propagation of his viewpoint through public debates.

Moves in this direction were set afoot by several letters from Utsabananda Vidyabagish. Written in Sanskrit, using Bengali script, Utsabananda's questions concerning the Shastras and Rammohun's replies were embodied in four booklets. According to one of his biographers, these were preserved at the Seerampore College Library. Utsabananda's subsequent association with the Brahmo Sabha (or Samaj) suggests that he was able to convert Utsabananda to Vedantic monism. Rammohun's discussions with Utsabananda

Vidyabagish through correspondence were held in 1816. This represented the first of a series of debates in which he met and defeated the representatives of orthodox Hinduism. Notable among these were the ones in which he was engaged in public debates against Bhattacharya in 1817, Goswami in 1818 and Subrahmanya Shastri in 1820.

It is hardly necessary to add that Rammohun's adversaries were not prompted by a genuine spirit of enquiry into the truth, but by a desire to vindicate the prevailing practice of popular Hinduism, by an appeal to the Shastras. In this context, his debate with Subrahmanya Shastri has many points of interest. Shastri gave out that taking advantage of the appalling ignorance of the Shastras among the Brahmins of Bengal, Rammohun was virtually distorting the scriptures to prove his viewpoint that monotheism was enshrined in them. He, Subrahmanya Shastri, would prove that idol worship alone had the sanction of the Shastras. The celebrated debate took place at the residence of Behari Lal Chaubay at Barabazar in the presence of the leading citizens of Calcutta, including Radhakanta Deb, foremost among the leaders of the orthodox Hindus. Those who came to scoff stayed to concede that Rammohun had, by a rare display of erudition and debating skill, carried the day. As the news of his triumph spread through the city, it stoked afresh the animus of the orthodox section.

It is necessary to add that these debates, carried out either through correspondence or on the public platform, were provoked by the publication of books, which Rammohun had been turning out in large numbers. No fewer than fourteen major works in Bengali and ten in English came from his pen in the five years between 1815 and 1820. The first of these was the Bengali rendition of Vedanta (1815). The title-page bore the following inscription :

“The Bengalee Translation of the Vedanta, or the resolution of all the Vedas; the most celebrated and revered of Brahminical Theology, establishing the unity of the Supreme

Being and that He is the only object of worship, together with a preface by the translator.”

To appreciate what a mighty stride this was towards religious reform, one had only to remember that knowledge of the Vedas was denied to all but the elite among the Brahmins. Another powerful factor which had placed the Shastras beyond the ken of all but the esoteric circle of priests and scholars was the fact that they were written in Sanskrit, a language few studied and fewer learnt well enough to undertake a meaningful study of the Hindu scriptures. By translating the Vedanta in living languages, for the first time, Rammohun struck a resounding blow at ignorance and at orthodoxy and superstition that batten on it.

The breach that Rammohun had made in the wall surrounding the Shastras by translating the Vedanta in Bengali was further widened when he published an abridged version of Vedanta both in Hindi and Bengali in 1816, under the title of “Vedantasar.” Mindful that the formidable bulk of the Vedanta and the style of the text might prove too much for the ordinary reader and anxious to ensure the widest possible dissemination of the basic teachings of the Vedanta, he compiled the concise version, embodying the essential features. He followed this up by bringing out the first ever English translation of the Vedanta in the same year. The English edition was as much an answer to the crassly ignorant criticism indulged in by certain European missionaries as it was to those Europeans whose sentimental approach to time-honoured Hindu custom led them to condone every superstitious practice.

Addressing the benighted traducers of Hinduism, Rammohun wrote in the foreword of the English version of Vedantasar: “The present is an endeavour to render an abridgement of the same (Vedanta) into English, by which I expect to prove to my European friends that the superstitious practices which deform the Hindu religion have nothing to do with the pure spirit of its dictates.”

To the sentimental supporters of popular Hinduism, intent on putting a gloss over all that was a departure from the Upanishadic

concept, Rammohun said: “I have observed that both in their writings and conversation, many Europeans feel a wish to palliate and soften the features of Hindu idolatry; and are inclined to inculcate that all objects of worship are considered by their votaries as emblematical representation of the Supreme Divinity.” But, Rammohun pointed out with force “the truth is that Hindoos of the present day have no such views”. He went on to say that, while it is true that “every rite has its derivation from the allegorical adoration of the true Deity, at the present day all this is forgotten, and among many it is even heresy to mention it.”

The degree of acerbity with which the orthodox community opposed Rammohun’s attempts to effect religious reforms by reviving the true Upanishadic spirit of monotheistic, formless worship, was clearly brought out in his own words. In the preface to the English edition of the abridgement of the Vedanta he wrote: “By taking the path which conscience and sincerity direct, I, born a Brahmin, have exposed myself to the complainings and reproaches even of some of my relations, whose prejudices are strong and whose temporal advantages depended upon the present system.” The orthodox bent every device of aggression—from personal vilification to deliberate falsification of his views—in an attempt to force him to submission. If the *Missionary Register* is to be believed, “the Brahmans made an attempt on his life twice but he was fully on his guard.” The reason for these vicious attacks are not far to seek. The blinkers of prejudice do not blind the orthodox to any real threat to its vested interests. The leaders of the orthodox section were not slow to recognize the instant threat that Rammohun’s activities posed to them. They knew full well that if his endeavours to place Vedantic knowledge within the grasp of the common man were to succeed, the elaborately-built facade of orthodoxy would shiver to the ground. Social reforms would, in that event, become irresistible. This explains why his unequivocal assertions that “I never attacked Hindu religion. I had attacked only superstition and bigotry” never weighed with the leaders of orthodox Hinduism.

Virulent opposition of the orthodox notwithstanding, the Bengali and particularly the English version of the Vedanta created widespread interest in India and abroad. Almost immediately after the publication of the English edition of ‘Vedantasar’, the Government Gazette in its issue of February 1, 1816, carried the preface to the book in its entirety and expressed the view that “the pamphlet is exceedingly curious, and whatever its intrinsic merits may be in a theological point of view, displays the deductions of a liberal, bold and intrepid mind”. There followed in a week’s time the publication of the full text itself in the Gazette.

European missionaries in India sent copies of the English edition of Vedantasar to Europe and America where they created a profound impression. In fact, Vedantasar represented India’s first message to the West in modern times, setting forth the concept of unalloyed monotheism contained in Brahmavad. Eminent Americans like Emerson and Thoreau and the transcendentalists were greatly influenced by Vedantasar.

In the clear light shed by the Vedantasar, western intellectuals could discern that India’s spiritual heritage was truly reflected in the monotheistic concept of Brahmavad and Hinduism was not to be equated with superstitious ritualism nor idolatrous polytheism in the Puranic tradition.

In September 1816, the *Missionary Register* published from London carried a long article on Vedantasar and an extended commentary on the author. In the following year, another edition of the book was published from London with a foreword from Digby. In the same year the book was translated into German under the title *Anflosund des Wedant* and published from Jena.

That Rammohun’s work was also known in France is clear from the remarks of the Abbe Gregorie, Bishop of Blois, France. The Abbe wrote: , “Every six months he (Rammohun) publishes a little tract, in Bengalee and English, developing his system of theism; and he is always ready to answer the pamphlets published at

Calcutta and Madras in opposition to him. He takes pleasure in this controversy; but although far from deficient in philosophy or in knowledge, he distinguishes himself more by his logical mode of reasoning than by his general views.”

It is worth emphasising that Rammohun’s pamphlets represented the first attempt in India to mobilize public opinion through the powerful medium of the printed word. Among those who joined the list against Rammohun in this battle of the printed word was Shankara Shastri, a teacher of the Madras Government School. Shastri’s article was of a piece with a whole series of attacks that were launched by the members of the orthodox school stung to fury by the successive publication of translations of the Shastras. The Bengali and English translations of both Kena and Ishopanishad were published in 1816. In 1817, the Bengali translations of Kathopanishad and Mandukopanishad were published, though two years were to elapse before their English translations appeared in print.

It was not difficult to see that Rammohun had not undertaken the publication of the Shastras as an academic exercise. The intent was the restoration of the Vedantic mode of worship and the prompting of religious reforms through the spread of knowledge.

Lauding Rammohun’s efforts, the *Calcutta Gazette* published an article in November, 1816 in which he was described as a “religious discoverer and a reformer”. In December, the *Madras Courier* carried an article under the signature of Shankara Shastri, contending that since the Vedas proclaimed the virtue of the worship of the One Formless God, Rammohun was hardly entitled to credit for being a discoverer and reformer. The article further argued that even though the Vedas commended the adoration of the One God, the worship of the idols of different deities could not be dismissed as false on that account. Just as a person of lowly station must rely upon high officials to approach his King, so must one pass through the stage of idol worship, preparatory to the worship of the formless deity.

Rammohun's reply, also couched in English, was published in the form of a pamphlet entitled "A Defence of Hindu Theism in reply to the attack of an Advocate for Idolatry at Madras". Using a formidable array of quotations from the Shastras, he demolished every argument put up in support of idolatry. As for Shastri's analogy between courtiers and kings and their subjects on the one hand and idol worship and the realization of the Brahma on the other, he added: "I must observe, however, in this place, that the comparison drawn between the relation of God and those attributes and that of a King and his Ministers, is totally inconsistent with the faith entertained by the Hindoos of the present day; who so far from considering their objects of worship as mere instruments by which they may arrive at the power of contemplating the God of nature, regard them in the light of independent Gods, to each of whom, however absurdly, they attribute almighty power, and claim to worship, solely on his own account."

Although the pamphlet "The Defence of Hindoo Theism" drew no fire from his opponents, attack on his writings, intended to spread true knowledge of the Shastras, came from an altogether new direction.

At a meeting of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta in August, 1817, a paper submitted by one Mr. Ellis was read out and discussed. Ellis, who was a member of the Madras Literary Society, charged that Rammohun had virtually borrowed the ideas of Robertus De Nobilibus who was believed to have set up a mission in Madurai in 1620. Following the approved manner of bigoted missionaries, Nobilibus, in writing on the Vedas, had condemned Hindu ideas wholesale.

Either through imperfect understanding or through deliberate distortion, Ellis tarred Rammohun and Nobilibus with the same brush and opined; "The whole scope of the Pseudo-Vedas is evidently the destruction of the existing belief of the Hindoos, without regarding consequence or caring whether a blank be substituted for it or not.

The writings of Rammohun Roy seem to be precisely of the same tendency as the discussion of Robertus De Nobilibus.”

The *Calcutta Monthly Journal*, which reported the proceedings of this particular meeting of the Asiatic Society, gave a spirited reply on its own initiative. The Journal emphasised that there was nothing in common between the outright condemnation of the Hindu Shastras by De Nobilibus and Rammohun’s reasoned defence of the basic teachings of the Shastras but equally logical rejection of the superstitious outgrowths that threatened to stifle the real spirit of Hinduism. In the words of the Journal: “The Pseudo-Vedas alluded to by Mr. Ellis was written to refute the doctrine as well as to show absurdities of ceremonies included by the Brahmins. Now, if we understand the writings of Rammohun, they are not intended to refute doctrines in their genuine language and thereby to show, that many of the ceremonies of the present day are neither enjoined by these doctrines, nor consistent with the pure system of Hindoo worship, which acknowledges only one God.”

Apparently, the Journal’s rejoinder was enough to silence Mr. Ellis. The next to take up the cudgels on behalf of orthodoxy, more particularly idol worship, was Mrithyunjay Tarkalankar, who came out with a book entitled “Vedanta Chandrika”, as a counter-blast to Rammohun’s Vedantasar. This was in 1817.

Following the precedent set by Rammohun, Tarkalankar brought out two editions of his book, one in Bengali and the other in English. Although there could be no doubt about his erudition—he was head pandit at Fort William College—Tarkalankar thought it fit to fall back on abusive language rather than logic. The attack drew forth from Rammohun another pamphlet, the Bengali edition of which was entitled “A Debate with Bhattacharya” and its English counter-part, “A Second Defence of the Monotheistical System of the Vedas”.

Rammohun quoted extensively from the Shastras to refute the points made by Tarkalankar and to vindicate the stand that Hinduism was in fact founded on monotheism.

Replying to subsequent challenges with equal alacrity and power, he published several booklets, usually in English as well as Bengali versions. An increasingly scurrilous tone marked the writing of many of his opponents, including Tarkalankar. Another was Goswami, who is believed to have published his booklet under an assumed name and the third was ‘Kalitakar’ who had definitely used a *nom-de-plume*. It would be fair to say that the more they failed to adduce Shastric arguments in support of their case, the worse became the vituperations of Rammohun’s opponents. What they failed to achieve by an appeal to reason, they sought to accomplish by personal vilification and a deliberate introduction of irrelevant issues. On the other hand, Rammohun’s dignified stand in the face of personal attacks in this and subsequent controversies as well as his charity towards his opponents drew admiring notice from the intelligentsia in the East and the West.

Rammohun’s faith in the judgment of his own countrymen never faltered. While he dismissed his opponents’ diatribes with disdain, he was always ready to place his views at the bar of public opinion. In the preface to the translation of Ishopanishad, he wrote. “I may conclude this subject with an appeal to the good sense of my countrymen by asking them whose advice appears the most disinterested and most rational that of those who, concealing your scriptures from you, continually teach you thus— ‘Believe whatever we may say—don’t examine or even touch your scriptures, neglect entirely your reasoning faculties—do not only consider us, whatever be our principles, as Gods on earth, but humbly adore and propitiate us by sacrificing to us the greater part (if not the whole) of your property—or that of the man who lays your scriptures and their translations before you, and solicits you to examine their purport, without neglecting the proper and moderate use of reason, and to attend strictly to their directions, by the rational performance of your duty to your sole Creator and to your fellow Creatures, and also to pay true respect to those who think and act righteously.”

Controversy with Missionaries

IT is easy to see that the attacks against Rammohun did not stem from the opposition of individual pandits. They actually reflected the implacable animosity of the Hindu community as a whole to his tireless efforts to bring about religious and social reforms. But for a handful of faithful adherents the members of the Atmiya Sabha—everyone disowned him. He himself described his estrangement from society in these words. “I, however, in the beginning of my pursuits, met with the greatest opposition from their (the Hindus) self-interested leaders, the Brahmins, and was deserted by my nearest relations; and I consequently felt extremely melancholy. In that critical situation, the only comfort I had was the consoling and rational conversation of my European friends, specially those of Scotland and England.”

There were yet others who applauded Rammohun’s efforts to put an end to idolatry among the Hindus and such social evils as the burning of widows and child-sacrifice; they were the Christian Missionaries. Motivated by reasons very different from those that inspired Rammohun, the missionaries nevertheless saw in his work much that could further their own objectives. Besides, his open admiration of the true spirit of Christianity and especially of Christian ethics had encouraged hopes that Rammohun would embrace Christianity. It is more than likely that the missionaries had taken special note of his unequivocal praise of Christianity contained in a letter that he had written to Digby. The relevant excerpt reads: “The consequence of my long and uninterrupted researches into

religious truth has been that I have found the doctrines of Christ more conducive to moral principles, and better adapted for the use of rational beings, than any other which have come to my knowledge.”

It was not for nothing that some missionaries prayed to God “to give him grace, that he (Rammohun) may in penitence and faith embrace with all his heart the Saviour of the world.” For they knew fully well that Rammohun, converted to Christianity, would prove to be a missionary without an equal, with “a mouth and tongue which no man shall be able to gainsay or resist.”

To say this is not to suggest that the more enlightened among the missionaries were devoid of a genuine regard and respect for Rammohun. His close and fruitful association with the Seerampore Missionaries began in 1815, when a missionary named William Yeates called on him. Subsequently Rammohun visited the Baptist Mission in Seerampore and was accepted with open arms by the noted educationist and missionary, Dr. William Carey and others. It will be remembered that the missionaries were instrumental in disseminating Rammohun’s works in Europe and America. The memoirs, correspondence and published writings of missionaries bear testimony to the high esteem in which they held him and the admiration with which they viewed his efforts to exorcise the superstitious practices that haunted Hindu society at that time. Struggling against the impediments set in their path by the East India Company, the missionaries probably understood better than anyone else what indomitable courage Rammohun had in command to carry on his own unaided efforts to overcome the opposition of society. On his part, he was unstinted in his praise for the service that the missionaries were rendering to promote the spread of education in India. In token of his appreciation, he made a gift of a plot of land to Carey for building a school.

Rammohun’s close association with the Seerampore missionaries proved to be of inestimable advantage in that it enabled the use of that mighty medium of communication—the printing

press. Further, the contact helped rekindle his earlier interest in Christianity and deepen his knowledge of the scriptures. In fact, he used to attend at times the family prayer meeting of Carey and counted among his valued possessions a copy of the Bible that Carey had presented him.

Rammohun's veneration for the teachings of Christ found expression in his book "The Precepts of Jesus", compiled from the Christian Gospels. Since his critiques had upto that stage been confined largely to Hinduism, his book on Christianity came as a surprise. The book drew the fire of both Hindus and orthodox Christians, led by his former admirers, the missionaries. The attempts of missionaries to discredit Hinduism and to convert the Hindus to Christianity had provoked the ire of the Hindus and the powder—keg was ignited when one of their own-depraved though he was in their eyes—publicly extolled the virtues of this alien faith.

It would be best to give in Rammohun's own words his reasons behind the publication of the book in the face of strong national prejudice. He said: "This simple code of religion and morality is so admirably calculated to elevate men's ideas to high and liberated notions of one God, who has equally subjected all living creatures, without distinction of caste, rank or wealth to change, disappointment, pain and death and has equally admitted all to be partakers of the bountiful mercies which he has lavished over nature—and is also so well fitted to regulate the conduct of the human race in the discharge of their various duties to God, to themselves, and to society that I cannot but hope the best effects from its promulgation in their present form."

"The present form" mentioned by Rammohun referred to the method of compilation. The book was a collection of all the moral and spiritual precepts of Jesus, without the narrations of the miracles. As a perfervid believer in the unity of Godhead, Rammohun did not accept the divinity of Christ. The missionaries, noted more for their proselytising zeal than for philosophical perspicacity, were incensed.

Their attacks came thick and fast against the audacious “heathen” as they chose to call Rammohun. The simple truth apparently eluded them that the man who deprecated the blind acceptance of the tenets of the religion of his forefathers would not accept the teaching of another without a critical examination.

Generally speaking, the missionaries were averse to philosophical speculations. They prided themselves in following the straight and narrow and, one might add, safe path sanctified by the tread of their predecessors. They conceded nothing to a Hindu priest or a Muslim mulla in the matter of orthodoxy. Such a body of men could hardly be expected to know that Rammohun was not alone in questioning the doctrinal part of the New Testament, the concept of the Trinity, dogma, mystery and miracle. It was wholly unlikely that they could have been remotely acquainted with the works of Faustus Socinus (1539-1604 A.D.) who had initiated a movement in the 16th Century, rejecting the Trinitarian doctrine, the divinity of Christ, the concept of the Original Sin, eternal damnation and symbolic atonement. Socinus held that man sinned when he aped Adam. Man would find his salvation if he were to lead the life that was lived by that God-like man, Jesus Christ. What was more, Socinus pleaded for rationalism by asserting that the Bible should be studied in the light of reason.

Though such liberal, rationalistic approach to religion had been a feature of the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, in India it manifested for the first time in the writings of Rammohun. Quite apart from the philosophical objections to the Trinitarian concept and miracles, there were other considerations, and they must have been of overriding importance in his view which impelled Rammohun to confine himself strictly to the teachings of Christ. In the introduction to the “Precepts of Jesus”, Rammohun wrote: “I feel persuaded that by separating from the other matters contained in the New Testament the moral precepts found in that book, it is more likely to produce the desirable effect of improving the hearts and minds of men of different persuasions and degrees of

understanding. For, historical and some other passages are liable to the doubts and disputes of free-thinkers and anti-Christians, especially miraculous relations, which are much less wonderful than the fabricated tales handed down to the natives of Asia, and consequently would be apt, at least, to carry little weight with them. On the contrary, moral doctrines, tending evidently to the maintenance of the peace and harmony of mankind at large, are beyond the reach of metaphysical perversion, and are intelligible alike to the learned and to the unlearned.”

The missionaries, who were quite incapable of appreciating Rammohun’s philosophical position missed the whole point of his reasoning and lashed out against him in blind fury.

Writing in the *Friend of India*, a weekly publication which was also the mouth-piece of the missionaries, Rev. Doecar Schmidt made a scurrilous attack against Rammohun, calling him “An injurer of the cause of Truth”.

Published under the signature of “A Christian Missionary”, Schmidt’s article presented too good an opportunity for a dig at Rammohun for the Editor, Dr. Joshna Marshman, to miss. In an editorial in the *Friend of India* in the issue which carried Schmidt’s article, Marshman described Rammohun as “an intelligent heathen whose mind is yet completely opposed to the grand design of the Saviour’s becoming incarnate”, and added: “The manner in which it is done, as *is* justly observed by our highly esteemed correspondent (Schmidt), may greatly injure the cause of truth.”

Rammohun promptly replied to the charges made by Schmidt in a booklet entitled “An Appeal to the Christian Public.”

This time, Marshman did not leave it to “esteemed correspondent” to make out a case against the arguments set forth by Rammohun but felt constrained to reply himself. He repeated the old, old argument that the dogma and the miracles that Rammohun had eschewed formed an integral part of the Gospel.

Their rejection, according to Marshman, “frustrates the grace of God in the Salvation of men.”

Carrying on his fight against Christian orthodoxy with the same unswerving purpose that he had done against Hindu bigotry, Rammohun published two books, One entitled the “Second Appeal to the Christian Public”, and the other captioned the “Final Appeal”. Both of these were written in reply to the articles of Dr. Marshman published in the *Friend of India*.

In the opinion of an impartial critic like Dr. Lant Carpenter, the “Second Appeal” was “distinguished by the closeness of his reasoning, the extent and critical accuracy of his scriptural knowledge, the comprehensiveness of his investigations and the acuteness and skill with which he controverts the positions of his opponents.”

Rammohun’s profound Biblical learning and his surpassing polemical skill stood out in bold relief from his voluminous writing. It was also manifest that in his researches into the Christian Scriptures he had by no means confined himself to the English rendering of the Bible. He had learnt Hebrew and Greek, so as to be able to study the original versions.

The onslaught against Christian orthodoxy that Rammohun had launched created a stir beyond the narrow circle of missionaries. Members of the public took a lively interest in the raging controversy. This was evidenced by the appearance of a number of articles or letters, some supporting him and some the missionaries. Among the first must be counted a letter published in the *Calcutta Journal* in July 1821. Obviously written in response to “The Second Appeal to the Christian Public”, it stated that it “cannot fail to produce in every Christian, great regard for the Author”, and added, “The more we learn of his (Rammohun’s) conduct, the more will he be raised in our estimation.”

The missionaries were not without their supporters either. The inviting columns of *Harkuru*, the rival of the *Calcutta Journal*,

was always open to them not only to canvass views contrary to those expressed by Rammohun but also for those who were so inclined to vent their spleen.

But there was nothing particularly remarkable in this. In any public controversy the supporters and opponents inevitably draw up the frontier along which to range themselves. The point of interest in all this lay in the refusal of the *Harkuru* to extend to Rammohun the right of rebuttal, and more particularly its outcome.

This is how it came about. The *Harkuru* had published a carping criticism of Rammohun's book, made by a missionary, writing under cover of a pseudonym. It refused to publish Rammohun's letter unless he expunged the passages which were vital. Subsequently the *Calcutta Journal* published the letter under the heading "A Rejected Letter".

This was by no means the only effort the missionaries made at gagging Rammohun. The slamming of the doors of the Mission Press on his face was a far more serious matter. As has been mentioned earlier, the missionaries had afforded the full facilities of their printing press to him at a stage when his polemical writings were mainly directed against Hindu bigotry. It would be only fair to mention that but for this help, Rammohun's ideas would never have spread as far and wide as they had within a short time. But when he joined issues with the missionaries on the fundamentals of Christianity, the attitude of the latter underwent a sea-change. Rammohun was, of course, not the kind of a man who could be defeated so easily. When his book "The Final Appeal To The Christian Public" came out in print in 1823, it bore the imprint-line of the Unitarian Press. By setting up a new press himself, he became independent of the uncertain support of the missionaries in the matter of printing.

Annoying though Rammohun's writings must have been to the missionaries, their consternation stemmed from a far more serious reason. This was the conversion of a young Baptist

missionary to the Unitarian doctrine through the influence of Rammohun Roy. The Rev. William Adam, who had joined the Seerampore Mission a few years prior to his conversion to the Unitarian cause in 1821, had been collaborating with Rammohun and another Christian missionary called Yates on the translation of the four Gospels into Bengali. As the work proceeded, several points of doctrine relating to the divinity of Jesus Christ came up for discussion. In these, Rammohun would put forward the Unitarian view, drawing upon his vast knowledge of the scriptures.

Matters soon came to such a pass that Yates felt constrained to resign from the translating committee. Subsequently, Adam made a public avowal of his Unitarian faith.

The outraged missionaries hounded the “Second fallen Adam” out of the fold and turned to attack with redoubled vigour the man who had brought about that “Fall”. The *Samachar Durpan*, the Bengali mouth-piece of the missionaries, was pressed into service to carry their vehement outpourings, remarkable for their lack of taste, balance, logic and even veracity.

Rammohun’s replies were rejected out of hand. This prompted him to bring out a bilingual periodical called the *Brahmunicipal Magazine*.

The publication carried Rammohun’s articles of scintillating brilliance in which he reiterated his views that trinitarian Christianity was no better than Hindu polytheism. He also exposed the attempts of those missionaries of feeble intellect who deliberately distorted Hinduism only to vilify it.

The *Brahmunicipal Magazine* represented a spirited protest against the farrago of falsehood that gushed from the missionary press in an unending flood. The level to which the missionaries had descended could be seen from the typical remark of one of them to the effect that Hinduism owed its origin to the Father of Lies.

Rammohun had protested time and again against such unabashed vulgarity. In his introduction to the “Final Appeal”, he

stressed the need for avoiding personal or offensive expressions and the introduction of extraneous or irrelevant questions. These “can only serve to retard the progress of discovery; and that we never allow ourselves for a moment to forget that we are engaged in a solemn religious disputation.”

The missionaries proved impervious to such reasoned appeals. One of them went so far as to emit the enormity in a pamphlet that the Vedas propounded atheism.

Rammohun could not let this pass unchallenged. In the foreword of the *Brahmunicipal Magazine* he wrote; “I find to my great surprise and concern, in a small tract issued from one of the missionary presses and distributed by missionary gentlemen, direct charges of atheism made against the doctrines of the Vedas, and undeserved reflection on us as their followers. This has induced me to publish, after an interval of two years, a fourth number of the *Brahmunicipal Magazine*.” In the same issue, Rammohun called upon the missionaries to learn a “lesson of charity, which they are ready enough to inculcate upon others.”

Some idea of how serious was the tone and temper of the *Brahmunicipal Magazine* can be gleaned from the titles of the articles. One of them, for instance, was “Reply to Certain Queries Directed Against the Vedant”, and another dealt with the “Reasons of a Hindoo for Rejecting the Doctrines of Christianity”. The latter was written in refutation of the familiar charges of superstition and moral degradation levelled by the missionaries against Hinduism. Rammohun maintained that the Vedas, as interpreted by Manu, represented the true spirit of Hinduism and not idolatrous practices prevalent at the time. If the missionaries insisted on magnifying the aberrations of Hinduism to the exclusion of everything else, “a Hindoo would also be justified in taking as the standard of Christianity the system which almost universally prevailed in Europe previous to the fifteenth century of the Christian era, with all its idols, crucifixes, saints, miracles, pecuniary absolutions from sins, trinity,

transubstantiation, relics, holy waters and other idolatrous machinery.”

Even when he wrote to expose the manifest absurdity of the position of his opponents, Rammohun adopted a strictly logical, objective approach.

In the July number of the *Asiatic Journal* (1829), he wrote an article against Trinitarianism and refuted the arguments based on mathematics advanced by a Christian missionary. Rammohun wrote. “Some time ago I heard a divine adduce mathematical argument in support of the Trinity. It is as follows:-

“That as three lines compose one triangle, so three persons compose one Deity. It is astonishing that a mind so conversant with mathematical truth as was that of Sir Issac Newton did not discover this argument in favour of the possible existence of a trinity, brought to light by Trinitarians, considering that it must have lain so much in his way.

This analogy between the Godhead and a triangle, in the first instance, denies to God, equally with a line, real existence, for extension of all kinds, abstracted from position or relative situation exists only in idea. Secondly, it destroys the unity which they attempt to establish between Father, Son and Holy Ghost, for the three sides of a triangle are conceived as separate existences.

Thirdly, it denies to each of the three persons of God the epithet ‘God’, in as much as each side cannot be designated a triangle.

Fourthly, it will afford to that sect among Hindoos, who suppose God to consist of four persons, an opportunity of using the same mode of arguing, to show the reasonableness of their sentiments by comparing the Compound Deity with the four sides of a quadrilateral figure.

Fifthly, this manner of arguing may be esteemed better

adopted to support the polytheism of the majority of Hindoos, who believe in numerous persons under one Godhead.”

The ultimate objective behind Rammohun’s devoted labour has been summed up neatly by Keshub Chandra Sen in these words: “An unsparing and thorough-going iconoclast, he yet failed not to extract the simple and saving truth of monotheism from every creed, with a view to leading every religious sect with the light of its own religion to abjure idolatry and acknowledge the One Supreme.”

Explaining that Rammohun had passed under review the scriptures of the historical religions, Keshub Chandra adds that “Rammohun spread no system of idolatry. But at the same time he called together passages from these scriptures inculcating Monotheism. Thus, he proved a friend and foe to each of the three principal religious systems (Hinduism, Islam and Christianity) of the world.”

Brahma Sabha

IT WAS while fighting the supporters of orthodoxy in every segment of society that Rammohun took a major step towards furthering the cause of Unitarianism.

This was the establishment of the Calcutta Unitarian Committee in 1827. Mr. William Adam, who became the minister of the Unitarian Mission, gave out in a letter to Mr. R. Dutton that among the members were a barrister of the Supreme Court, an attorney, a surgeon in the service of the East India Company and a senior employee of a British commercial firm. The Indian members mentioned by name were Dwarkanath Tagore, Prasanna Coomar Tagore and Rammohun's eldest son, Radha Prasad Roy.

In an article in a Chicago publication called *The Unity*, published in October, 1833, Charles R. Joy recounted how the Unitarians in England and America were "stirred to missionary enthusiasm" by what Rammohun had done for the Unitarian cause.

Moncure Daniel Conway, a noted American writer also testified to the decisive influence exercised by Rammohun in the formation of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association.

In an article published in the *Chicago Open Court* in 1894, Conway wrote, "It was Rammohun Roy who really caused the organisation of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association. Some adherents of the Hindu teacher started theistic movements in various places, and those of Madras communicated with Mr. Fox. In September 1820, the Parliament court sent five guineas to the

native Unitarian of Madras and in 1824 twenty pounds were contributed to build an Anglo-Indian Unitarian Chapel in Calcutta. It was these facts and the Hindu religious poetry translated by Rammohun Roy which awakened Mr. Fox to a unity larger than Unitarianism. That Hindu was, *in fact*, a religious thinker without a peer in Christendom. With him began the reaction of oriental on occidental thought, which has since been so fruitful. On May 25, 1831, the Association held its sixth anniversary in South Place Chapel, and Raja Rammohun Roy arrived just in time to be present. There were present Unitarians from France and Transylvania; and Dr. Kirkland, President of Harvard University, was there. Rammohun Roy spoke briefly but impressively and filled all present with enthusiasm by the charm of his personality.”

The steps taken by Rammohun to build up Unitarianism on an international scale were undoubtedly important; but more significant in the historic perspective were the objectives that he had set before the Unitarian Association that he had helped to found in Calcutta. The document in which he set out the objectives of the Association provides yet another evidence that the end he sought to subserve through religious reforms was human welfare.

How essentially modern Rammohun’s social outlook was, becomes clear from this excerpt from the document which outlines the aim of the Unitarian Association:

“And whatever, therefore, has a tendency to diffuse the benefits of education, to destroy ignorance and superstition, bigotry and fanaticism, to raise the standard of intellect, to purify the theories of morals, and to promote universal charity and practical benevolence will be considered as within the scope of their design. The melioration of the physical condition of the numerous native population, the encouragement of the useful arts and of industrious habits amongst them and the consequent increase of their social and domestic comforts, the Committee regards as legitimate objects of pursuit, as all experience shows that it is only when the first wants of nature

and society are fully supplied that the higher degree of improvement in intellect, in morals, and in religion, can be expected to follow.”

Revolutionary in Rammohun’s days, the ideas embodied in the objectives are relevant in our own.

He saw clearly that the unification of all great religions could be achieved and their seeming differences reconciled only on the basis of Unitarianism. It could not be otherwise, since all great religions proclaimed that there was but One God. In replying to questions that the orthodox often hurled at him as to why Rammohun should frequent a Unitarian place of worship instead of the numerously attended established Churches, he wrote: “Because Unitarians believe, profess and inculcate the doctrine of divine unity—a doctrine which I find firmly maintained both by the Christian Scriptures and by our most ancient writings, commonly called the Vedas.” And to promote Hindu Unitarianism, Rammohun established the Vedanta College in 1825. On this, William Adam wrote in a letter to his friend in July, 1826 thus:

“Rammohun Roy has lately built a small but very neat and handsome college which he calls the Vedanta College in which a few youths are at present instructed by a very eminent Pandit in Sanskrit literature with a view to the propagation and defence of Hindu Unitarianism. With this institution he is also willing to connect instructions in European Science and learning and in Christian Unitarianism, provided the instructions are conveyed in the Bengali or Sanskrit language.”

For all the help of Rammohun, extended to the detriment of his personal interest and fortune, the Unitarian Association languished and died. The times were out of joint for progressive ideas.

The efforts to set up the Unitarian Association did not go altogether in vain, for on its ashes was built the more enduring structure of the Brahmo Sabha.

Two different versions are current regarding the circumstances that led to the setting up of the Brahmo Sabha. One of these is that Adam, realizing that the end of the Unitarian Association was near, had suggested this as a substitute. The other version has it that it was in response to requests from his close associates, Tarachand Chakravarti and Chandra Sekhar Deb for a place of worship for Unitarians that Rammohun had set up the Sabha.

Whatever might have been the immediate cause for setting up the Sabha, the fact remains that unlike the Unitarian Association, the Sabha drew towards itself many adherents, including the most enlightened section of the Indian society. Notable among them were Dwarkanath Tagore, Tarachand Chakravarti, Ram Chandra Vidyabagish, Chandra Sekhar Deb, Ramnath and Prasunna Coomar Tagore.

Recital of Vedic hymns, readings from the Upanishads and their explanation in Bengali, devotional songs and a sermon in Bengali were prominent features of the meetings of the Sabha. The first sermon was translated into English by the Secretary, Tarachand Chakravarti. In forwarding copies to a European friend, Rammohun wrote to explain that it “exhibited the simplicity, comprehensiveness and tolerance which distinguish the religious belief and worship formerly adopted by one of the most ancient nations on earth and still adhered to by the more enlightened portion of their posterity”.

The Sabha continued to attract new members and within two years of the inauguration in 1828, Rammohun was able to purchase a house to serve as a permanent place of worship for everyone who believed in monotheism.

Six days before the public consecration of the building, the orthodox leaders of the Hindu community in Calcutta set up, as a counter measure, a rival organisation called the ‘Dharma Sabha’. Led by Radhakanta Deb, this organization, as also its organ *Samachar Chandrika*, was to spearhead the attack of the orthodox against Rammohun’s religious and social reform movements.

Many of Rammohun's biographers have recorded that after the establishment of the Unitarian Association, Rammohun would often aver that he was a Hindu Unitarian. Yet, at a later day and age, those among the Hindus who had adopted the Unitarian mode of worship in the Vedantic tradition came to be regarded as a separate and distinct communal entity. This was due, in the main, to the exclusiveness of the Hindu society which sought to preserve its 'Purity' by ostracising everyone who did not bow to prevalent customs or ritualism. In this is to be sought the source for the prevalent popular belief that Rammohun was the founder of the new faith of Brahmoism and that he was above all a religious reformer.

Actually, this popular concept runs counter to all that Rammohun did, wrote or said. He was in truth a universalist. His lifelong researches into the scriptures of the world religions were directed to the discovery of the fundamental unity in the essentials of great religions. A recurring theme, in his religious writings and utterances, was the Unity of the Godhead.

He acknowledged that the differences in the circumstances in which each historic religion was born were reflected in the historic utterances in each. But at the same time he exploded the myth that the rituals or dogma which expressed the differences, were sacrosanct. In Rammohun's view the factors that exaggerated the differences as between religions were extraneous, whereas on the essentials there was unity. He took upon himself the task of finding a synthesis among the great religions and cultures of the world.

These were the basis of his fervid faith in monotheistic worship and in secularising social ethics.

The trust deed of the Brahmo Sabha clearly brings out the non-sectarian nature of his movement for religious reforms. It lays down that the trustees "Shall, at all times, permit the same building, land and premises, to be used, occupied, enjoyed, applied, as and for a place of public meeting, of all sorts and descriptions of people

without distinction for the worship and adoration of the Eternal, Unsearchable and Immutable Being, who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe, but not under, by any other name, designation or title, peculiarly used for and applied to any particular Being or Beings, by any man or set of men whatsoever; but such as have a tendency to the promotion of the contemplation of the Author and Preserver of the Universe, to the promotion of charity, morality, piety, benevolence, virtue and the strengthening the bonds of union between men of all religious persuasions and creeds.”

It is the trust-deed that inspired Mahadeva Govinda Ranade to declare; “The spirituality, the deep piety and universal toleration of this document represent an ideal of beauty and perfection which it may yet take many centuries before its full significance is understood by our people.”

Ramananda Chatterji, the renowned journalist and Brahmo leader of his period also testifies to the essentially non-sectarian approach of Rammohun. He points out that “at the time when he established the Brahmo Samaj he meant it to be simply a meeting-ground for people of all sects who wished to unite for divine-worship.”

External evidence also supports the view that Rammohun did not, and had not intended to establish a new, separate religious denomination. Up to the time of his departure for Europe in 1830, there was no publication which bore the title of “Brahmo” Dharma or religion. It was in 1841 that Maharshi Debendra Nath Tagore compiled such a volume. By then Rammohun Roy had passed away. At a later date Maharshi Debendra Nath codified the procedures for Brahmo religious service for such occasions as marriage, etc. There is little doubt that Rammohun and his contemporaries had used the term Sabha or Samaj to connote an Association and not a sectarian religious group.

Even later-day Brahmo leaders, some of them noted for their zeal for preserving the separate identity of Brahmos as a sect,

corroborated the view that Rammohun's Brahma Sabha was really a congregation of non-sectarian monotheistic worship.

Thus Keshub Chandra Sen, who did much to spread the message of Brahmoism outside Bengal, wrote in the *Indian Mirror* in 1865 that Rammohun "belonged to no existing sect; nor did he seek to found a new sect or originate a new creed, however refined and unexceptionable. His great ambition was to bring together men of all existing religious persuasions irrespective of the distinctions of caste, colour or creed into a system of universal worship of One True God. Thus his catholic heart belonged to no sect, and to every sect; he was a member of no Church and yet of all Churches. He felt it his mission to construct a Universal Church based on the principle of unitarian worship. Who can contemplate without emotion the grandeur of such a Universal Church, a Church not local or denominational, but wide as the universe and co-extensive with the human race, in which all distinctions of creed and colour melt into one absolute brotherhood. It is not a church of Jesus or Mohammed; but is emphatically God's Church. It is not a church of Hindus or Christians; it is the church of all mankind. It is not a church of Bengal, nor of India; it is the church of the world."

Much the same ideas were expressed by Sir R. Venkata Ratnam in his presidential address at the Theistic Conference in Calcutta in 1906. He said: "As the immortal trust deed defined its object, the Brahma Samaj was to be a spiritual fraternity of all without any artificial distinction, for the worship of God, limited by no sectarian conception, tarnished by no sectarian rancour, but fruitful in promoting the union of man with man, and the great virtues of morality and piety, charity and benevolence."

The unifying character of Rammohun's concept was clearly brought out by Mr. Satish Chandra Chakrabarty. In a speech on "Rammohun the man", he said: "Rammohun's idea was that his Samaj was to be not a temple of a new sect, but the unifier of all India, through the common worship of one God by the members of

all denominations. We rarely realize the faith and vision of Rammohun, namely that the Hindu, the Muslim and the Christian, each pursuing his faith, may unite in worship.”

During his lifetime, many adversaries of Rammohun deliberately distorted his views in a futile bid to get the better of him. It was ironic that after his death, it was precisely his followers who lost sight of his universalist outlook to form themselves into a separate sect.

One unfortunate result of this was the manifestation of a widespread tendency to identify Rammohun with a particular religious community and to think of him primarily as a religious, and derivatively a social reformer and little else besides.

But to say that Rammohun's followers chose to form themselves into a community is not to suggest that his influence was confined to this group.

Asserting that Rammohun had introduced ideas which had brought about a sea-change in Indian outlook, Dr. Percival Spear says: “Rammohun Roy provided not merely an excuse for accepting some portion of the western heritage, by claiming that this or that was really to be found in the Indian tradition or that various criticised portions of the Hindu tradition were not an essential part of the Indian religion; he provided a principle which linked the ideas of the East with those of the West.”

Dr. Spear adds: “It was in the fifty years from about 1830 to 1880 that the new Indian middle-class became permeated with this outlook.”

This new outlook owed its birth to Rammohun's abandonment of “the traditionally accepted bases of Hindu religion and Brahmanic authority in favour of reason.” And this is much the most important point.

Plea for Scientific Education

THE DRIVING passion of Rammohun Roy was the desire to free the spirit of man from the shackles of superstition, ignorance and unreason. The idea gripped him in his early youth and showed itself through his variegated activities till the very end. In fact, this idea lay beneath all his movements for reforms—religious, social and educational.

In Rammohun's days, the educational institutions that had served their turn in the heyday of Mughal rule were in a state of decay. Such *madrassas* and *tols*, as did exist, were good for little more than rudimentary instructions in elementary arithmetic and a smattering in Indian languages. Higher education, imparted through the medium of Sanskrit or Persian and Arabic, was hide-bound to traditional curricula, designed to corral the mind within the safe limits of orthodoxy.

The ruling power, the East India Company, did very little and cared much less about the spread of education in India, at least in the early stages.

The East India Company officials, anxious to avoid the ruffling of "Native" feathers, scrupulously avoided the least bit of interference with local customs or practices. It was hardly surprising that such support as the officials chose to extend was reserved strictly for institutions of oriental learning along traditional lines.

It was in pursuance of this policy that Governor-General Warren Hastings set up the Calcutta Madrassa in 1781. The idea

was to afford opportunities to Muslim students to master Arabic and Persian. A parallel step for the promotion of Sanskritic studies was taken in 1792 when the British Resident, Mr. Jonathan Duncan, set up a Sanskrit College in Varanasi.

But it was not for nothing that the East India Company took these steps. The Company's officers had perforce to lean heavily on Indians learned in Hindu and Muslim jurisprudence in order to carry out administrative duties.

These two institutions were expected to ensure a steady supply of qualified Hindu and Muslim personnel to assist the administrators.

Officialdom not only did nothing to promote the teaching of English; it actually set its face firmly against the spread of Western education in India. The Company's obstinate opposition to the introduction of Western education was prompted not by any excessive regard for oriental learning but shrewd, calculated self-interest. Any lingering doubt on this score was removed by the document presented before the House of Commons Select Committee by Marshman on July 15, 1853.

In this it was stated: "For a considerable time after the British Government had been established in India, there was great opposition to any system of instructions for the natives. The feelings of the public authorities in the country were first tested upon the subject in the year 1792, when Mr. Wiberforce proposed to add two clauses to the Charter Act of that year, for sending out school masters to India. This encountered the greatest opposition in the Court of Directors, and it was found necessary to withdraw the clauses. That proposal gave rise to a very memorable debate, in which for the first time the views of the Court of Directors upon the subject of education after we had obtained possession of the country were developed. On that occasion, one of the directors stated that we had just lost America from our folly, in having allowed the establishment of schools and colleges, and that it would not do for us to repeat the same folly in regard to India." Apparently, lack

of shrewdness was not one of the failings of the members of the Court of Directors of the East India Company.

In 1793, when the East India Company's Charter came up for renewal, Charles Grant circulated a brochure among the members of the Board of Control, in which a strong case was made out for taking adequate steps for the education of Indians. Grant's efforts also came to nought, because of the intransigence of the Court of Directors.

In the absence of any positive policy, even the facilities for oriental education had sunk to such depths that in 1811, Lord Minto, the Governor-General, said in alarm: "Science and literature are in a progressive state of decay among the natives of India" and went on to add, "It is to be apprehended that unless Government interpose with a fostering hand, the revival of letters will shortly become hopeless from want of books or of persons capable of explaining them." Nor did Lord Minto fail to suggest concrete steps to stem the rot. He recommended that in addition to the college at Varanasi (to be subjected to the reform already noted) colleges be established at Nuddea and at Bhour in the district of Tirhoot.

Needless to add that the new institutions envisaged by Lord Minto were to be Sanskrit colleges. During Minto's days, British officials considered the learning of Sanskrit as a badge of distinction. Among Minto's advisers were such eminent Sanskrit scholars as Sir William Jones, Dr. H. Wilson, Mr. Colebrook and the Princep brothers—Toby and James.

It would be fair to assume that it was the influence of these scholars that produced in Minto his penchant for Sanskritic learning. In the controversy that was to rage later between the Orientalists and those who favoured Western education, the British scholars in Sanskrit lent powerful support to the former.

Members of the British Parliament took note of Lord Minto's views and when the Charter came up for renewal in 1813, they urged the Court of Directors of the East India Company to take

appropriate measures for the revival of learning in India. Thus goaded, the Court of Directors sent instructions to its servants in India, laying down: "That a sum of not less than a lakh of Rupees, in each year, shall be set apart, and applied to the revival and improvement of literature and the encouragement of the learned natives of India."

Rammohun was painfully aware of the woeful inadequacy of the prevailing educational system, if indeed it could be described as a system, and from the time that he took up permanent residence in Calcutta in 1814, he bent his efforts towards the amelioration of the situation. His profound admiration of the cultural value of Sanskrit/Arabic literature, born of his own vast erudition, did not for a moment hide from his view their inadequacy in meeting the requirements of the modern age. He saw clearly that after the impact with the West, brought on through the agency of the British, India would never be the same again.

His deliberate choice was for a science-orientated education to foster a Renaissance, which would achieve for India what the Revival of Learning had done for Europe.

Clear recognition of the role of Western education and thought prompted Rammohun to support the efforts made by the missionaries and individual Eurasians to set up schools for the teaching of English.

While the attitude of British officers towards the idea of imparting English education to Indians veered between apathy and opposition, some non-official Englishmen recognized the need for promoting English education. Outstanding among them was that true friend and benefactor of India, David Hare.

In 1816, Rammohun and David Hare drew up a plan for setting up an educational institution in which the youth of this country could study European science and literature.

The idea was placed before the then Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Sir Hyde East, by Baidyanath Mukherjee, a prominent

member of the Atmiya Sabha, being cast in a mould different from those of the usual run of officials at the time, Sir Hyde reacted with enthusiasm and called a meeting of the leading members of the Hindu community to give shape to the project. The community leaders, unaware that Rammohun was the moving spirit behind the whole idea, voiced their enthusiastic and virtually unanimous support to it.

As soon as the truth became known, the orthodox section reversed its position and threatened to withdraw its support unless Rammohun's name was dropped from the list of members of the proposed committee. This placed Sir Hyde in an awkward situation. To exclude unceremoniously the sponsor of the scheme itself, would obviously be an ungracious act. Yet Rammohun's retention would have invited in advance certain failure for the whole enterprise.

Rammohun, to whom the cause was immeasurably more important than a place in the committee, broke the impasse himself. When David Hare told him that matters had come to such a sorry pass, the latter promptly wrote to Sir Hyde East to resign from the committee.

Peary Chand Mitra, in his biography of David Hare, recorded the incident in these words: "There was no difficulty in getting Rammohun to renounce his connection (with the proposed college) as he valued the education of his countrymen more than the empty flourish of his name as a committee-man."

With the removal of the last hurdle in the way of the implementation of the project, the college, variously known as the Hindu College, the Indian College, Maha Patsala, the Native Hindu College and the Vidyalaya was established in 1817.

After his formal resignation from the Committee, Rammohun continued to help the newly-established college in every possible way and worked for the spread of Western education with undiminished enthusiasm. In 1822, he set up, by his own unaided effort, the High English School or the Anglo-Hindu school under

the auspices of the Unitarian Association. His active associates in this laudable enterprise were Rev. William Adam and David Hare, and among the pupils were Debendra Nath Tagore and his (Rammohun's) son, Ramaprasad.

How much more advanced this school was from the then existing institutions becomes evident from an account of the school published in the *Bengal Harkaru* of January 10, 1828. The report states: "Besides three classes that were examined in reading, spelling, grammar and translation, the first or the most advanced class was also examined in Joyce's Scientific Dialogues on Mechanics and Astronomy, in the first sixteen propositions of the first book of Euclid, and in the translation into Bengalee a passage of Voltaire's History of Charles XII of Sweden ..."

It was largely through Rammohun's encouragement that the Christian Missions were drawn to the field of Indian education. And it is well known that the Missions proved to be a powerful factor in speeding up the spread of Western education. When Dr. Alexander Duff, one of the earliest representatives of the Christian Educational Missions to India came out in 1823, the activities of the missionaries were looked upon with such disfavour that it was almost impossible for Dr. Duff to rent premises to start a college. The chances of getting pupils were even more remote. Rammohun intervened to secure a house for Dr. Duff and also the first batch of students.

This willing help was acknowledged by Rev. W.S. Urqhurt, a former Principal of the Scottish Church College, Calcutta. Speaking at the Rammohun Centenary Celebrations, he said: "I represent a college which at the time of its foundation owed much to the assistance and encouragement of Raja Rammohun Roy. As is well known, it was he who provided Dr. Alexander Duff with the room in Chitpore Road, where his college was first started."

In 1823, a year after Rammohun had established his English school, the first Council of Education was appointed. It will be

recalled that in 1813, the Court of Directors had authorised the expenditure of a lakh of rupees a year for the encouragement of “learning among the native races”. Since nothing was done for a matter of ten years, the allotted amounts accrued over the years. The Government now placed this sizeable amount at the disposal of the Council for the furtherance of education. The Council members, mostly British high officials, were oriental scholars almost to a man. They plunged with much enthusiasm but little foresight into the task of reviving Sanskrit and Arabic learning. Lord Minto’s plans for Sanskrit colleges at Nuddia and Tirhoot never materialised and the Committee of Education now proposed to set up such a college in Calcutta.

Another major project of the Committee was the printing of ancient Sanskrit and Arabic books. How wasteful this well-meaning but misdirected effort turned out to be, will be seen from but one example. The reprinting of an Arabic book entitled “Abesenna” cost Rs. 20,000. The cost of translating many ancient books into Persian worked out to Rs. 16 per page. Since these translations proved to be beyond the comprehension of the average student, the translator himself had to be engaged on a salary of Rs. 300 a month to expound the text. There was hardly any demand for the books that were translated, or printed. After collecting dust for a long time they were eventually sold as waste paper.

At all events it was clear that the Government was set on spending all available funds on revival of such learning as had been prevalent for generations. In the words of Sir Gooroodas Banerjee, such learning was mainly concerned with metaphysical speculation and “devoted itself exclusively to the contemplation of the spiritual side of the Universe to the utter neglect of the material”. Besides, metaphysical dogmas, in the very nature of things, were not capable of being tested. This tended to encourage blind reliance on authority. And this was a habit of mind Rammohun had always striven to eradicate.

Government’s headlong pursuit of an obsolete educational

policy provoked Rammohun to address a letter of protest to the then Governor-General, Lord Amherst.

The letter, dated December 11, 1823, epitomised the essentials of an educational policy of a modern nation. The letter read: “We now find that the Government are establishing a Sanskrit school under Hindu Pandits to impart knowledge as is already current in India. This seminary (similar in character to those which existed in Europe before the time of Lord Bacon) can only be expected to load the mind of youth with grammatical niceties and metaphysical distinction of little or no practical use to the society. The pupils there will acquire what was known two thousand years ago, with the addition of vain and, empty subtleties since produced by speculative men such as is already commonly taught in all parts of India.

If it had been intended to keep the British nation in ignorance of knowledge, the Baconian philosophy would not have been allowed to displace the system of the schoolmen, which was best calculated to perpetuate ignorance. In the same manner, the Sanskrit system of education would be best calculated to keep this country in darkness, if such has been the policy of the British legislature.

But as the improvement of the British native population is the object of the Government, it will consequently promote a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry and anatomy, with other useful sciences which may be accomplished with the sum proposed by employing a few gentlemen of talent and learning educated in Europe, and providing a college furnished with the necessary books, instruments and other apparatus.”

Rammohun Roy’s strong advocacy in favour of education in the sciences, as clearly enunciated in his letter to Lord Amherst, pre-dated by thirteen years the establishment of the College of Chemistry in England, and by full 37 years the creation of the Faculty

of Science in the University of London. Half a century was to elapse after the celebrated letter before courses in science were established to a significant extent at Oxford or Cambridge. To remember this is to realize how far ahead of his age Rammohun was.

The Metropolitan of India, Bishop Hebbel, through whose courtesy, the letter was put in the hands of Lord Amherst was struck by “its good English, good sense and forcible arguments”.

But neither good sense nor forcible arguments weighed with the bureaucracy. The test they applied to the letter was not that of logical reasoning but of footling formality. It was pointed out that the Government had accepted the suggestions of Hall Mackenzie, a member of the General Committee of Public Instructions to the effect that arrangements should be made for teaching Western science in all educational institutions that were to be set up. The Government obviously believed that this was more than enough for native intellect. Further, the official line was that the British Parliament had sanctioned money to be spent on furthering ‘Native’ education. Rammohun’s ideas in support of Western education for Indians were not in consonance with the sense of the Parliament. The bureaucrats pounced on the fact that the letter to Lord Amherst bore the signature of one man alone, and, therefore, could not be regarded as representative. How could they countenance Rammohun’s assertion that most Indians were in favour of Western education? With characteristic brusqueness, J. H. Harrison, President of the General Committee of Education, dismissed the letter with the remark that “it was entitled to no reply”.

Soon after the peremptory dismissal of the letter, the Government was faced with another strong prompting in favour of Western education. This time, the urgings stemmed from a source that the bureaucrats always held in dread: Authority.

The Committee of the Court of Directors addressed a communication to the Indian Administration in February, 1824, in

which were echoed the views of Rammohun on the question of education. Expressing views contrary to the ones held by the General Committee on Education, the letter emphasised that “the great end should not have been to teach Hindoo learning, but useful learning”. No one was left in any doubt that “useful learning” was synonymous with the study of the sciences.

Although the India hands did not dare brush aside the views of the Directors with the same haughty disdain as they had done Rammohun’s, they nevertheless put up a dogged, last-ditch stand. They wrote back to say that the public in general took a poor view of Western, science-oriented education. Although prejudice against Government intervention in regard to education was on the decline, it could easily flare up again, if attempts were made to “impose” European education on the public. In conclusion, the officials raised the plea that the path of wisdom would be to “go with the tide of popular prejudice” and maintained they had “said sufficient to show that the course is by no means unprofitable.”

At first sight the cause that Rammohun had espoused seemed lost. But even though the Government had rejected his ideas, history upheld them. Those among Rammohun’s contemporaries who had eyes to see realized that he had pointed unerringly to the path to India’s regeneration. They formed themselves into what came to be known as the “Anglicist” group to continue the agitation for the introduction of Western education along modern lines. The culminating point was reached in March, 1835, when Lord William Bentinck, the Governor General, supported by the Law Member, Lord Macaulay, issued the now famous Education Decree to put his imprimatur on Western education. Although Rammohun Roy did not live to see this consummation, the signing of the decree undoubtedly marked the triumph of his living thoughts.

That Western education owed its advent in India to the inspiration of Rammohun is freely acknowledged in the Report of the Education Commission, appointed by Lord Ripon in 1882. The

relevant excerpt from the Report reads: “It took twelve years of controversy, the advocacy of Macaulay and the decisive action of a new Governor-General, before the Committee could, as a body, acquiesce in the policy urged by him (Rammohun). There is no great modern Indian but is a product of the synthetic culture fostered by the fusion of Western ideas and Indian thought. Who can doubt that the process of the fusion was hastened by the adoption of the educational policy advocated by Rammohun? Modern India itself vindicates his prophetic vision.”

Origin of Bengali Prose

IT IS not often realized that while recognizing the compelling need for the introduction of English and with it the teaching of the sciences, Rammohun never overlooked the overriding importance of developing the Indian languages, particularly Bengali. In fact he is acknowledged as the maker of modern Bengali prose. He found Bengali an inchoate, formless, inflexible thing, weighed down by Sanskrit words, and forged it into an instrument capable of expressing precisely subtle and lofty ideas. In his hands, Bengali prose became muscular, flexible and mature.

In Bengali literature before Rammohun's days, prose had no place. Verse was the only medium of literary expression. Prose served its turn in the drafting of legal documents, and recording commercial transactions. Sanskrit remained the language of the learned and no one in his right mind would think of using Bengali prose for serious literary or philosophical purpose. Those *pundits* who did condescend to write in Bengali usually used it to make a parade of their knowledge of Sanskrit by maximising the use of unfamiliar and difficult Sanskrit words. Even as late as the eighteenth century, Bengali prose remained cumbersome, ambiguous and verbose.

Chronologically speaking, the Christian Missionaries and the pundits of the Fort William College were the first to attempt to write Bengali prose. The missionaries sought to utilize it as a means of spreading Christianity among the people while the aim of the pundits was to equip young British Officers with the means to

communicate with the people whom the officers were to govern. Thus, the prose works in Bengali published by both were either text books which could serve as a Bengali primer for foreigners or religious tracts for the propagation of Christianity. Thus it was that the first Bengali non-religious book in prose, written by one Ramram Basu and published in 1801, was a text book for foreigners. There followed in 1802 a book called 'Batrisa Simhasana' by Mrityunjaya Vidyalkar. Though the latter marked a distinct improvement over the former, they were in essence of the same genre. They represented the Sanskritised, loosely-knit prose of the period. Then came a sea-change with dramatic suddenness, with the publication of Rammohun Roy's first Bengali work, the Vedanta Grantha.

Here was Bengali prose which was qualitatively different from anything that had been written before. This was also the first attempt to express in Bengali prose the lofty philosophical ideas embodied in the Upanishads. No one before Rammohun had dared to believe that Bengali prose would be capable of carrying the weight of serious philosophical thought.

In sharp contrast to the highly Sanskritised vocabulary and involved unending sentences, unbroken by punctuation marks, which characterized Bengali prose upto that time, Rammohun developed a simple, direct style, unencumbered by complex parenthetical clauses and compound words. Furthermore he introduced the use of punctuation marks, which made for easier comprehension. Aware that despite its greater simplicity, his new style of writing might strike many readers as strange for its sheer novelty and so turn them away, Rammohun wrote an extensive introduction to the Vedanta Grantha to describe the limitations of contemporary Bengali prose and expound the basis of the composition of his writing. In the process, he enunciated clearly the rules of syntax and laid bare his whole mental process in creating prose literature in the Bengali language.

As a fitting pendant to this, Rammohun composed the first Bengali grammar, Gouriya Vyakaran, for the benefit of those whose

mother tongue was Bengali. As was the case with Bengali prose, the first attempt to compile a Bengali grammar was made with an eye to teaching the language to young British officers. For instance, on the title page of Nathaniel Brassy Halhead's Bengali Grammar, published in 1778, it was clearly indicated in so many words that it had been compiled for the benefit of Firenghees (Anglo-Indians).

Gouriya Vyakaran covered in eleven chapters sixty-eight subjects, from the true purpose of grammar to rhyme and scansion.

Rammohun was unequivocal that grammar was not meant to encase a language in a steel frame but to uncover its structure. He also underscored the patent truth that the grammar of one language could not be forced upon another and that the production of Bengali prose of a high order was impossible through a mindless imitation of Sanskrit prose style. By taking it out of the shade of the banyan tree that Sanskrit was, he assured for Bengali a place in the sun.

The Calcutta School Book Society, which was set up to supervise the selection of books for educational institutions, had approached Rammohun to compile the Gouriya Vyakaran. It was also at the instance of the Society that Rammohun had submitted to it the manuscript of a book on geography in Bengali. He had also undertaken to translate into Bengali, Furguson's 'Introduction to Astronomy'.

Rammohun's prose-writing in Bengali was mainly confined to scriptural and didactic or polemical works. In the nature of things, the subject matter demanded a severely functional style. For the expression of his artistic talents he chose sacred songs. He composed no fewer than thirty-two songs and set them to Dhrupad tunes to be sung as hymns at his Brahmo Sabha gatherings.

It is interesting to note that Rammohun was the first to compose Dhrupad songs in Bengali. Before this, Thumri, Tappa, Kirtan and Ramprasadi modes, all in the classical tradition and folk-tunes like Baul, Sari and Jari held the musical stage in Bengal. The seldom heard Dhrupad songs were exclusively in Hindi. Most

of the tunes prevalent at the time, particularly Tappa and Thumri were too frolicsome to lend themselves to devotional songs intended for the meetings of the Brahmo Sabha. For these, Rammohun naturally turned to Dhrupad, noted for its depth, simplicity, grandeur and the absence of decorative effusion. Under the guidance of Maharishi Debendranath Tagore, the Brahmo Samaj took up Dhrupad songs after Rammohun and enriched them beyond measure.

It is on the foundation laid well and truly by Rammohun that Bankim Chandra Chatterji and Vidyasagar built the wondrous edifice of Bengali literature. Later, Tagore lifted Bengali to the stature of a world-language.

Prof. Sukumar Sen, the noted Bengali scholar, aptly described Rammohun's role in the creation of Bengali prose when he said, "When we consider all these achievements of Rammohun in the field of Bengali literature and language, the least we can say is that without him Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra and Rabindranath would not have been possible."

Social Reforms

THE STARTING point of Rammohun's fight against medievalism was religious reform. This is because he fully recognized the interrelationship between religious reformation and social and political progress. Here, more than in many other countries, social customs were inextricably bound with religious beliefs and the horror of the cruelest of customs was covered by the carefully constructed casement of religious sanctity. The mask of sanctity that bigotry wore, served to scotch all attempts at social reforms. In the circumstances, religious reform was, therefore, a pre-condition to social reforms.

There was yet another compelling reason why Rammohun's efforts did not stop short at religious reform and "his mind turned more and more from theory to practice, from doctrines to institutions, from polemics to reforms." This was his abiding faith in humanism. For him, all reforms, including religious, were a quest for 'Lokasreya', the common good. True to the tradition of India, he elevated the quest to the realm of 'dharma'. The humanist view of religious reforms comes through sharp and clear in much of his writings. For instance, Rammohun wrote in 1828: "I regret to say that the present system of religion adhered to by the Hindus is not well calculated to promote their political interest. The distinction of castes, introducing innumerable divisions among them, has entirely deprived them of political feeling. It is, I think, necessary some changes should take place in their religion at least for the sake of their political advantage and social comfort."

Many of his close friends have gone on record to say that he would frequently quote Sadi's line that "the true way of serving God is to do good to man."

It was not surprising then that Rammohun should have bent his efforts towards social reforms almost synchronously with religious reforms.

Understandably, Rammohun accorded priority to the task of eradicating the revolting custom of burning Hindu widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands. Shocked by the traumatic experience of seeing his sister-in-law (brother's wife) immolated, he began his one-man crusade against the custom of Suttee long before he launched a systematic campaign against its removal in later years. We have it on the authority of his autobiographical note in which he says. "My continued controversies with the Brahmins on the subject of their idolatory and superstitions and my interference with their custom of burning widows and other pernicious practices, revived me." In this lone effort, he had little support.

Although the custom of Suttee had attracted the attention of the Government in 1789, little was done by the Government till 1813 beyond expressing holy horror at the gruesome practice. Upto that stage, the Government, paralysed by its desire not to interfere in religious practices of the Hindus, remained supinely indifferent. Outside Government circles, however, opinion was hardening against the practice of Suttee.

The Seerampore missionaries, led by Carey, drew Government's pointed attention to the alarming number of Suttee cases, while individual officers were persistent in their reports on the widespread use of physical force or drugs for goading unwilling but helpless victims to their doom. Government then considered it expedient to initiate a series of enquiries to obtain legal opinion in the matter.

Since the British officers' sole advisors on Hindu law were orthodox Brahmin pundits, this step, in effect, meant calling for the

opinion of a highly prejudiced group. As was to be expected, the pundits upheld the custom, adding the rider that it was against the Shastras to permit the performance of Suttee if the widow were in the family way or had very young children or were herself of a very tender age.

After a good deal of hesitation, the Government issued a directive in 1817 to magistrates and police officers “to allow the suttee in those cases where it is countenanced by their religion, and prevent it in others in which it is prohibited by the same authority.”

Lest anyone should jump to the conclusion that this directive signified a departure from the Government’s settled policy of non-interference in religious matters, it should be added that the Court of Directors had earlier made it clear to the Governor-General that “it is undoubtedly the policy of our Government to abstain from interference with the religious opinions and prejudices of the Natives.” The Governor-General dutifully echoed this thought by reminding the servants of the Company that it was not “the intention of the Government to check or forbid any act authorised by the tenets of the inhabitants of their dominion.”

If the purpose of the Regulations was to place the slightest restriction on the practice of Suttee, it actually produced the opposite result. The Regulations virtually gave a legal sanction to this cruel custom and emboldened the orthodox to carry out widow-burning without let or hindrance. How ineffective the Regulations had been, was reflected in the statistics the Government had collected in 1818. They revealed that no fewer than 2,365 widows had been burnt alive between 1815 and 1818. Of these, 1528 were inhabitants of Calcutta and its surrounding districts. Even these Regulations, with their imaginary restrictive powers were evidently proving irksome to the benighted leaders of the Hindu community, intent on saving the souls of women by consigning them to the flames. And when the Regulations relating to Suttee promulgated in 1813 and in 1815 were issued in a collected form in 1817, the leaders of the

orthodox society promptly submitted a petition to Government, strongly urging the repeal of these Regulations. This provoked Rammohun and his friends to put up a counter-petition in which was set out in vivid detail the pressures that were exerted and physical force employed to compel women to perform the Suttee. It was the submission of the petitioners that “All these instances are murders according to every Shastra, as well as to the common sense of every nation.”

As a practical step, Rammohun formed with his friends a sort of vigilance committee to ensure that force was not used and the requirements of the Regulations were met in regard to the performance of Suttee in and around Calcutta. At the same time, he addressed himself to the task of mobilizing public opinion against the custom of Suttee, aware of the pervasive tide of prejudice in its favour, but undaunted by it. Starting with his tract in Bengali published in 1818, he put out a series of pamphlets in Bengali and English on the question of Suttee.

Through these publications Rammohun demolished the arguments of the supporters of the custom of Suttee with devastating logic and cited the Shastras to disprove the contention of orthodox Hindus that the practice had religious sanction behind it. It is of more than passing interest to note that the famous orientalist Horace Hyman Williams had supported the view that the practice of Suttee was ordained by the Shastras. Since Rammohun had adduced all his arguments against the practice of Suttee from the Shastras, he proved William’s views to be erroneous.

By establishing the fact that the Hindu Shastras had nowhere enjoined self-immolation for widows, Rammohun did much to strengthen the hands of the enlightened Bentinck in putting an end to this inhuman practice by legislation in 1829. Bentinck’s minutes, a testament against tyranny, deserves to be quoted. It said: “The first and primary objective of my heart is the benefit of the Hindus. I know of nothing so important to the improvement of their future

condition as the establishment of a purer morality, whatever their belief, and a more just conception of the will of God. The first step to this better understanding will be disassociation of religious belief and practice from blood and murder.

“When they shall have been convinced of the error of this first and most criminal of their customs, may it not be hoped that others which stand in the way of their improvement may likewise pass away, and that thus emancipated from those chains and shackles upon their minds and actions, they may no longer continue, as they have done, the slaves of every foreign conqueror, but they may assume their just place among the great families of mankind.”

Though Lord Bentinck's enactment made the burning of widows illegal, it by no means marks the end of the agitation by the orthodox. Continuing their fight against the abolition of the Suttee, the die-hard Hindu leaders submitted a petition to Governor-General Bentinck, signed by 800 persons and backed by the opinion of 120 pundits. Rammohun met the move by submitting a congratulatory petition in which the numerous signatories thanked the Governor-General for putting through the humane measure. Not to be out-done, the opponents of the measure called a public meeting at which it was resolved to take the matter to the authorities in England. They also set up an organization called the Dharma Sabha. As has been mentioned earlier, the main objective of this body was to counter the activities of Rammohun's Atmiya Sabha, specially in regard to those connected with the abolition of Suttee and other progressive social measures. *John Bull*, the mouthpiece of British conservatism, teamed up with *Samachar Chandika*, the organ of the orthodox Hindus, to lend support to the proponents of Suttee. The Dharma Sabha engaged Francis Bathie, an attorney of the Supreme Court, for presenting a petition to the British Parliament on behalf of orthodox Hindus to solicit permission to burn widows alive. Rich financial reward apparently induced in Bathie the right religious ardour, and in the course of a speech he declared: “I am now proceeding to England on your behalf, and to fulfil your wishes

I will spare no labour either of body or mind or speech. I take God to witness that there shall be no negligence on my part.” A principal objective of Rammohun’s trip to England shortly afterwards was to thwart all attempts to influence the British Parliament into repealing the anti-Suttee laws.

In carrying on his fight to secure for Indian women their right to live as individuals even after the death of their husbands, Rammohun did not overlook the related question of their right to property. Under the Hindu law then extant, women were debarred from inheriting any part of the property of their husbands or fathers. Deprived of the means of sustenance, women who could not count on their husbands for maintenance, were a source of economic liability. Physical extermination of widows had its financial advantages. This was the gruesome truth that lay beneath the unctuous cant about religion being the motivating force behind the agitation for the repeal of the anti-Suttee Regulation.

In protest against this inequitable practice, Rammohun wrote his pamphlet entitled “Modern Encroachment on the Ancient Rights of Hindu Females According to the Hindu Law of Inheritance.” Published in 1822, the pamphlet brought out, on the authority of ancient Hindu law-givers, that this unjust practice was the result of deliberate distortion of traditional Hindu law.

The question of inheritance of property by women had a direct bearing on other social evils such as *kulinism* and its concomitant, polygamy. If the widows were an actual financial burden, the unmarried daughters were potentially so to their father’s family. The easy way of removing this threat was not by physical destruction but marriage. More often than not, the right caste was the only criterion of eligibility for the grooms so that healthy young girls were married, well before their teens, to the old and the infirm, the lame and the halting. The kulins, highest in the hierarchy of castes were much sought after. They capitalised on this by marrying as many wives as possible, invariably for monetary considerations.

Rammohun never lost an opportunity to voice his views against polygamy, using the platform of the Atmiya Sabha and the printing press for the purpose. His contention was that anyone who wished to take a second wife during the life-time of the first should be allowed to do so only on proving before competent legal authority that the conditions under which polygamy was permitted by the Hindu Shastras were fulfilled.

A topic to which Rammohun reverted again and again was the divisive nature of the caste system and its deleterious effect on the political life in India. In a letter to a friend he wrote “The distinction of castes, introducing innumerable divisions and subdivisions among them, (The Hindoos) has entirely deprived them of patriotic feeling.”

Then again in an article in the *Brahmunical Magazine* he pointed out : “We have been subjected to such insults for about nine centuries and the cause has been our excess in civilization as well as our division into castes, which has been the source of want of unity among us.”

Rammohun attempted to encourage inter-caste marriage without appearing to make too violent a break with the Hindu tradition, by urging that the Hindus should consider Saiva marriages just as valid as Vaidik marriages. In doing this, he cited the authority of the Mahanirvana Tantra, which lays down : “There is no discrimination of age and caste or race in the Saiva marriage. As enjoined by Siva, one should marry a woman who has no husband and who is not ‘Sapinda’, that is, who is not within the prohibited degrees of marriages.”

In order to bring before a wide public an authoritative, analytical and objective study of the institution of caste, Rammohun republished in 1827 a Sanskrit treatise entitled “Bajra Suchi” or “The Needle of Adamant” together with a Bengali translation. Written by an eminent Sanskrit scholar and pundit, Bajra Suchi refuted, in the light of the Shastric teaching, every major argument adduced in support of the caste system.

Rammohun's basic approach to social reforms, as for religion and culture, rested on a synthesis between the East and West. In a penetrating study on Rammohun, Dr. Brajendranath Seal underscored this. Dr. Seal pointed out that Rammohun had aimed at reconciling the good of the individual with the good of the greatest number—in other words, harmonising individualism and socialism. He wrote :

“The East had placed the group above the individual in social organisation, and the individual above all social bonds in the quest of summum bonum. The West had stressed the claims of the individual in social polity, and of the social good in the Kingdom of God. The Raja held that individual progress is the touchstone as well as the measuring rod of social progress; but the individual's progress could be secured only by organizing and establishing the conditions of social progress.”

Economic Affairs

WRITING ON Rammohun Roy, Jawaharlal Nehru said: "He was more than a scholar and investigator; he was a reformer above all." In fact, there was no department of national life which was left untouched or uninfluenced by Rammohun's life-long endeavour. For, the task that Rammohun had set for himself was nothing less than reshaping the mental frame of his countrymen and transforming the very quality of life.

In fighting his battles for many-sided reforms, Rammohun had, in the last analysis, waged an unending war against medievalism. How significant this aspect of his work was, has been brought out clearly by Bepin Chandra Pal.

According to Bepin Chandra, "the chief value of Raja's labours, to our mind, seems to lie in his fight against the forces of medievalism in India, and it is for this reason that we claim for him the honour of being the Father of the present Indian Renaissance". In pointing out some of the characteristic features of Indian medievalism, and the consequences that flowed from them, Bepin Chandra said that one of them was to encourage "an abstract Universalism of the popular Vedantic school which, denying all marks, notes distinctions or differentiations in the Divine Entity, practically propounds a kind of veiled Agnosticism"; on the other hand it emphasised "the abstraction of the senses from their objects, of the mind from thinking, of the emotions from feeling, of the will from acting, of man from society" as methods of spiritual culture.

Yet another characteristic of medievalism found expression in the prevailing ceremonialism of the country, which abstracts “thought from feeling, reasons from life, religion from theology, and reduces the religious life of the people to a round of external observances, and men in its higher types to a system of unethical disciplines”. Further, from medievalism sprang the belief in chaotic homogeneity of the different departments of life’s activities. Differentiation and autonomy, the essential conditions of healthy evolution, becomes impossible under this medievalism.

“Religion, or more correctly speaking, theology and ritualism usurp the functions of the different functions of social and civic life and everything is thought to be regulated and controlled by the fanciful abstractions and *a priori* assumptions of the priests’ code. This medievalism sets up a false ideal of religion as an incubus upon every department of a peoples’ life whether economic and industrial or political and legal or educational or social.” Unless the incubus of religious dogmas and disciplines were removed and they were granted the fullest autonomy and freedom to grow along their own legitimate lines of development, no true progress was possible in any of these departments.

“The objective of all the many-sided activities of Raja Rammohun Roy”, said Bepin Chandra, “was to free his country from this fatal incubus of medieval abstraction.”

Thus it was that Rammohun “sought to work out the problems of economics by economic methods along their own lines, to solve financial and political questions by the highest principles of the sciences of politics and government, and thus he struck out a happy balance between these different departments of national life.”

And these different departments of human activity, working together, though each along its own path, would establish the New Jerusalem.

Rammohun, who was nothing if not a far-sighted realist, knew full well that Jerusalem—either old or new—was not built in the air.

That he clearly recognised the co-relationship between cultural regeneration and economic growth, is to be seen from his suggestions for administrative reforms to improve the condition of the *ryots*, his opposition to the East India Company's monopolistic trading rights, the monopoly enjoyed by the servants of the company in the matter of salt trade, his support to the principle of free trade and colonization of Europeans. It is remarkable that he should have pointed out the draining of India's resources by Britain a century before the issue became the main plank of the Congress Party's platform.

The Charter Act under which the East India Company was formed not only conferred upon it the monopoly to carry on trade in India but also empowered it to prevent any British national from coming to India to engage in trade or agriculture. Armed with these powers, the company pursued a policy of naked despoliation and straightforward loot. The dual objectives of the Company's programme of ruthless exploitation were to keep India in a tight grip as a supplier of cheap raw materials for the factories in England, and use India as a dumping ground for the finished products from English factories. This enabled the Company and its servants to enrich themselves beyond the dream of avarice.

Understandably, the lure of limitless wealth prompted many individual Europeans to agitate for the removal of the Company's monopoly and the restrictions placed on Europeans regarding the right to buy or own land in India. Towards the end of the 18th century, quite an animated controversy had been sparked off between the supporters of monopoly and free trade.

As can be easily imagined, the very thought of free trade was anathema to the officers of the East India Company.

As the demand for free trade began to gather strength, the Company's panic-stricken officers started flooding the office of the Court of Directors with reports which highlighted the dire fate that would overtake the Company if Europeans were allowed to poach on its closed preserve.

A senior officer by the name of Francis wrote : “A measure which tends to throw the farming of lands into the hands of Europeans must, independent of every other consideration, be attended with difficulties prejudicial to the Company’s revenues.” The reason? The Europeans, unlike Indians, would not submit to the high-handed and illegal extortions by the Company’s revenue collectors. If Britons were allowed to own farms, there would be no other way for the recovery of the Company’s dues from them, except through a recourse to the Supreme Court. “It appears to me”, the alarmed Francis concluded, “that under such a system, the revenues could not be realised, the collections would universally fail and in the end our possession of the country would be very precarious.”

In 1788, the Governor-General himself thought it necessary to write to the Court of Directors. His contention was that “if the proposed scheme (Free Trade) were adopted, multitudes of Europeans would flock into the interior parts of the country; they would naturally possess themselves of the seats of manufactures abandoned by the Company, eager competition must immediately arise, enhanced prices and debased fabrics follow.”

The Governor-General was apparently serious in thinking that the Court of Directors would swallow his monstrous assertion that competition would push up prices and bring down the quality of goods.

Upto 1824, the demand for free trade, particularly by indigo planters was stifled by a farrago of fantastic nonsense marshalled to prove that free trade would mean an invitation to chaos and ruin.

Though the stranglehold of the monopolists remained intact in India, it had been broken in Ceylon at the turn of the 19th century. The East India Company took up the reins of the governance of Ceylon when the British ousted the Dutch from power. True to form, the Company placed a ban on individual Europeans setting up business or farms on the island. In 1801, the British Government

itself assumed the responsibility of governing Ceylon and five years later entrusted Sir Alexander Johnstone with the task of drawing up a report on the ways and means of promoting trade and agriculture in Ceylon. Basing itself, on Sir Alexander's report in which European capital, scientific technology and machine-production were shown as pre-requisite to economic growth, the British Government annulled all the restrictive measures enforced by the East India Company. Free trade was introduced in Ceylon, marking the birth of industrial revolution in the country.

In India, however, the situation remained unchanged, except for minor relaxation made by the Government to entice Europeans to grow coffee in Bengal. Despite this, discontent among the British community outside the official circle continued to grow. Supporters of free trade called a meeting in 1827. At this, the first public meeting at which the demand for European colonization was voiced, it was decided to submit a petition to the British Parliament pleading for the removal of disabilities that prevented British nationals from engaging in trade or agriculture in India. In other words, it was a plea for free trade. The opponents of free trade, who counted among them a padre and many Indian landlords, at once launched a whispering campaign, claiming that if Europeans were allowed to own land, they would dispossess Indian zamindars. What was more, the help of the colonizers would be enlisted to force whole-sale conversion of Hindus to Christianity. That the Company's servants should form an alliance with Indian zamindars against fellow Britons to fight the demand for free trade should cause no surprise. As always, the passion for financial gains mastered the patriotic ardour of the Company's servants.

On their part, the zamindars became the most vociferous opponents of free trade for they had acquired a vested interest in the continuation of the Company's rule, under which they were given a free hand to exploit the peasantry. The share-out in the loot was well-defined, with the East India Company monopolising the trading and the zamindars the rural sector.

Encouraged by the East India Company and egged on by a padre, the zamindars planned to submit a petition to the British Parliament opposing free trade and the proposals for the colonization of Europeans. The paper of British reaction and conservatism, *John Bull* lent powerful support to the unrelenting propaganda barrage that the zamindars and the Company kept up. It should be noted that the propagandists seized upon and magnified the misdeeds of the indigo planters to imply that colonization would aggravate the situation.

A powerful rejoinder against the insidious propaganda came out in *Sambad Kaumadi*, the publication that Rammohun had started in December, 1821. This was in the form of a letter in which the author held up to public gaze the real reasons that lay behind the virulent opposition to free trade.

The article brought out clearly that, the excesses of the indigo planters notwithstanding, the economic condition of the lower and the middle classes had improved in areas where the Europeans had set up indigo plantations. From the dispersion of money, employment opportunities had expanded, and what was most important those peasants who were in former times forced by their zamindars to labour for them without any remuneration or for the gift of small quantities of rice were being paid salaries for their labours. The writer added that those who were employed by the planters as clerks etc., were no longer the victims to the whims of zamindars.

The zamindars knew as much and were enraged at the prospect of having to pay for labour which they could hitherto commandeer for nothing. There lay the rub for them.

The letter also shed light on the hypocrisy behind the zamindars' mock concern over the harsh repression of the peasants by the indigo planters. The writer stated that "from a reference to the reports made from time to time to Government by its inquisitive judges, the cruel behaviour of the Zamindars towards their ryots, will be satisfactorily proved."

The inescapable conclusion was that free trade and colonization would serve to give the whole economy a forward thrust and they, therefore, represented a progressive trend. In conclusion, the writer asserted with conviction that “whosoever is disposed to oppose the unrestricted residence of Europeans in this country, provided certain changes shall at the same time be introduced into the system of administering justice, is an enemy of the natives and to their rising and future generations.”

The letter appeared under the signature of “A Zamindar”. And the signatory was no other than Dwarkanath Tagore, Rammohun’s close friend and associate.

Though Rammohun’s views on the question of colonization and free trade were more well-defined, on fundamentals they paralleled those of Dwarkanath.

Rammohun and Dwarkanath were among the leading participants in a meeting in 1829 called to protest against the rejection by the Court of Directors of the Company of an appeal from many Calcutta residents for permission to own land in Bengal. Dwarkanath moved a resolution which read : “One of the main legal obstructions to the commercial, agricultural, and manufacturing improvements consists in the obstacles to the occupancy or acquisition of land by British subjects.” Pointing out the various improvements arising out of the setting up of indigo plantations, Dwarkanath added: “If such beneficial effect, as those I have enumerated, have occurred from bestowing European skill in one article of production alone, what further advantages may not be anticipated from the unrestricted application of British skill, capital and industry to the very many articles which this country is capable of producing.”

Supporting Dwarkanath strongly, Rammohun declared: “I fully agree with Dwarkanath Tagore in support of the resolution just read. There may be some partial injury done by the indigo planters, but on the whole, they performed more good to the generality of the natives of this country than any other class of Europeans, whether in or out of the Service.”

Rammohun's views on a whole range of fundamental questions on economics and politics were expounded in detail in his replies to the questionnaire issued to him by a Select Committee appointed in 1831-32 by the British Parliament. Two of these questions, along with Rammohun's replies, would suffice to show that his whole idea was that conditions should be created in which British technology and capital could work to bring about economic transformation in India.

One of the questions of the Select Committee was: "Would it be injurious or beneficial to allow Europeans of capital to purchase estates and settle on them?"

Rammohun answered: "If Europeans of character and capital were allowed to settle in the country, with the permission of India Board or the Court of Directors or local government, it would greatly improve the resources of the country and also the conditions of the native inhabitants, by showing them superior methods of cultivation and the proper mode of treating their labourers and dependants."

The other question was: "Would it be advantageous or the reverse to admit Europeans of all descriptions to become settlers?"

Rammohun's forthright reply was: "Such a measure could only be regarded as adopted for the purpose of entirely supplanting the native inhabitants and expelling them from the country."

It should be transparently clear from Rammohun's replies that he would have only "Europeans of character and capital" to settle in India and nothing was farther from his idea than the thought that thousands of Europeans should be allowed to descend on India like locusts and spread all over the countryside.

Rammohun developed and expounded his ideas on this all-important issue fully in an article published in a London journal in 1832. Studying the problem from every conceivable angle, he analysed in depth the whole case for colonization without minimizing the dangers and at the same time suggesting measures for eliminating them.

Adumbrating the advantages, Rammohun pointed out that “European settlers will introduce the knowledge they possess of superior modes of cultivating the soil and improving its products”. Indians would benefit not only from this but also from “improvements in the technical arts, and in the agricultural and commercial systems” that the settlers would promote. Secondly, free association with Indians would help Europeans to disabuse their minds of many mistaken notions about Indians—prejudices which prompted Europeans to subject “the great body of Indian people to social and domestic inconvenience, and disqualified them from useful exertions”.

The third point made by Rammohun is worthy of special note. He argued that European settlers would be freely “aware of the rights belonging to the subjects of a liberal Government and the proper mode of administering justice, and would obtain from the local Governments, or from the Legislature in England, the introduction of many necessary improvements in the law and judicial system; the benefit of which would of course extend to the inhabitants generally, whose condition would thus be raised.” In addition, the “presence, countenance and support of the European settlers would not only afford to the natives protection against the impositions and oppression of their landlords and other superiors, but also against any abuse of power on the part of those in authority.”

Furthermore, European settlers would be instrumental in the spread of education and “the diffusion of a knowledge of European arts and sciences.” Through their friends and connections in Europe, the settlers would broaden the channels of communication between India and the West. Both the public in Britain and the Government would be better informed, so that the latter would be “much better qualified to legislate on Indian matters than at present. For information on India, the British Government would not have to rely solely on East India Company officials who, in any case, could hardly fail to regard the result of their own labours with a favourable eye.”

Finally, a prosperous and resurgent India in which the citizens enjoyed civil and political rights, would not only be able to defend itself, but would be a source of strength to Britain and of inspiration to the neighbouring Asian countries.

Presenting the other side of the medal, Rammohun drew pointed attention to some of the dangers that were latent in the idea of colonization. First of all, the settlers, because of their kinship with the ruling race, “may be apt to assume an ascendancy over the native inhabitants and aim at enjoying exclusive rights and privileges, to the depression of the larger and less favoured class.” In sheer arrogance, they could wound the feelings of Indians.

An effective safe-guard, Rammohun repeated, was to allow only “educated persons of character and capital” to settle in India. The other step strongly suggested by him was the “enactment of equal laws, placing all classes on the same footing as to civil rights and the establishment of trial by jury (the jury being composed impartially of both classes). This would place a curb on overbearing characters among Europeans.

Rammohun went on to explain that, for obvious reasons, European settlers would enjoy easy access to those in high places. This would give the settlers undue advantage over the native population.

Weighing the pros and cons carefully, he put forward the view that “settlement in India by Europeans should at least be undertaken experimentally, so that its effects may be ascertained by actual observation.” So far as he was concerned, the proviso always was: the settlers must be men of character, education and capital.

Rammohun’s ceaseless endeavour in this regard did not go in vain. The new Charter granted to the East India Company in 1833 laid down that Europeans will be allowed to settle freely in areas which had passed under the Company’s jurisdiction already but would require to obtain special permission for settling in other areas. A new phase in the economic development in India began.

Rammohun's role in ending the East India Company's monopoly in the salt trade is equally significant. During the days of Robert Clive and Warren Hastings, individual officers were allowed to participate in the salt trade and they amassed enormous wealth from it. The Government imposed very heavy import duty on salt, and protected by this tariff wall, the Company and its servants arbitrarily fixed the price of salt 1000 per cent above its natural price. For the actual manufacture of salt, the Government employed agents, and the latter held some 1,25,000 *mulunghees*, as the labourers who worked at salt manufacture were called, in virtual slavery. After manufacture, salt was transported to Calcutta to be sold in bulk at periodic auctions. A small but tight ring, formed by a few Indian businessmen which ran the business, would corner salt to raise prices. What was more, they would adulterate salt to such an extent that it was little better than common clay when it finally reached the consumer.

Rammohun emphasised that the entire people suffered as a result of this man-made salt famine. It was obvious, he said, that the consumption of salt will shoot up, if the price of salt were reasonable. He urged that English salt, which was cheaper and better, should be allowed to be imported. Since the import of salt would mean loss of employment for the *mulunghees*, they should be provided alternative employment in agriculture.

Rammohun's views on this issue were embodied in his reply to the questions set by the Select Committee of the British Parliament. The case for ending the Company's monopoly was put so convincingly that the Select Committee endorsed it. Rammohun's answers to the Select Committee's questions on the revenue system of India constituted a powerful plea for justice for the peasantry.

Rammohun knew from personal knowledge that while the zamindars were greatly benefited by the Permanent Settlement of 1793, the poor peasants' lot remained as bleak as ever. He wrote: "The condition of the cultivators is very miserable. They are placed at the mercy of the zamindars' avarice and ambition. The landlords

have met with indulgence from Government in the assessment of their revenue while no part of it is extended towards the poor cultivators.” The rent was exorbitantly high, and left hardly any surplus for the cultivators. Rammohun not only demanded that a ban be placed on any further rise in rent, but urged its reduction. The resultant loss of revenue could be made up by tax on luxury goods, and by employing as Collectors, Indians in the place of high-salaried Europeans.

The following questions by the Select Committee and Rammohun’s answers, would best serve to bring out how progressive Rammohun’s views were on a subject of transcendent importance.

Question: Does the ordinary rate of rent seem to press severely on the tenants?

Answer: It is considered in theory that the cultivator pays half the produce to the landholder, out of which 10-11ths or 9-10ths constitute the revenue paid to the Government, and 1-10th or 1-11th the net rent of the landholder. This half of the produce is a very heavy demand upon the cultivator, after he has borne the whole expense of seed and labour; but in practice, under the permanent settlement since 1793 the landholders have adopted every measure to raise the rents by means of the power put into their hands.

Question: Are the tenants now subjected to frequent increases of rent?

Answer: At the time when the permanent settlement was fixed in Bengal (1793 A.D.) Government recognized the Zamindars (landholders) as having alone an unqualified proprietary right in the soil, but no such right as belonging to the cultivators.

Question: Can you suggest any change in the revenue or judicial system which might secure justice and protection to

the cultivators against the oppression of the Zamindars, middlemen or officers of Government?

Answer: I have already suggested that no further measurement or increase of rent on any pretence whatever should be allowed. Secondly, Public Notices in the current languages of the people, stating these two points, should be stuck up in every village, and the police officers should be required to take care that these notices remain fixed up for at least twelve months; and to prevent any infringement thereof, on receiving information of any attempt at re-measurement on the part of any landholder (zamindar) etc., any native judicial Commissioner for small debts (Munsiff) who is authorised to sell distrained property for the recovery of rent, should be required not to proceed to sale unless fully satisfied that the demand of the zamindar had not exceeded the rate paid in the preceding year; and if not satisfied of this, he should immediately release the property by application to the police. Thirdly, that the judge or magistrate be required to hold a court one day in a week for cases of this kind, and on finding any zamindar guilty of demanding more than the rent of the preceding years, should subject such offender to a severe fine, and on discovering any police officer or native commissioner guilty of connivance or neglect, he should subject them to fine and dismissal from the service. Fourthly, the judge or the magistrate in each district should be directed to make a tour of the district once a year, in the cold season, in order to see that the above laws and regulations for the protection of the poor peasantry are properly carried into effect. Fifthly and lastly, the Collector should be required to prepare a general register of all the cultivators, containing their names, their respective portions of land, and respective rents as permanently fixed according to the system proposed.

Question: Can you suggest any improvement which might secure the revenue to the Government and protection to the people?

Answer: The regulations already in force are fully adequate to secure the Government revenue. But to secure the people against any unjust exactions on the part of the revenue officers, I would propose, first, that the Collectors should not by any means be armed with magisterial powers. Secondly, that any charge against the revenue officers should be at once investigated by the judicial courts to which they are subject, without reference to the number of cases on the file of the court, as has been the practice with regard to causes in which the collectors are prosecutors; so that both parties may have an equal chance of legal redress. This, under existing circumstances, seems to be the best remedy that presents itself; but with the present system, I must repeat that redress will not always be attainable.

It would be permissible to assume that few among Rammohun's contemporaries realized what an enormous financial price India was being forced to pay for the "blessing" of being governed by the East India Company. But this grievous economic wrong did not escape Rammohun and in replying to the Select Committee's questions on the revenue system, he protested against this economic drain. He prepared several tables to prove his point and wrote:

"By the evidence of Messrs. Lloyd and Melville (the former, the Accountant General and the latter, the Auditor General of the East India Company), recorded in the Minutes of the evidence taken before the Select Committee of the House of Lords, on 23rd February, 1830 it appears that the proportion of the Indian revenues expended in England on the territorial account amounts, on an average, to £ 3,000,000 annually. It includes the expenses of the Board of Control and

India House, pay, absentee allowances and pensions of Civil and Military Officers in Europe for services in India, with interest of money realised there etc., besides £ 453,588 for territorial stores consigned to India.

“In a letter of the Court of Directors to the Government of Bengal, dated the 20th of June, 1810, and quoted in the work ‘On Colonial Policy as applicable to the Govt. of India’, by a very able servant of the Company, holding a responsible position in Bengal, the Directors state : It is no extravagant assertion to advance, that the annual remittances to London on accounts of individuals, have been at the rate of nearly £ 2,000,000 per annum for a series of years past”. From these and other authentic documents the author calculates the amount of capital, or the aggregate of tribute, public and private so withdrawn from India from 1765 to 1820 at £ 100,000,000.”

Years later, the Indian National Congress made it a major issue in its agitation against British rule.

Rammohun’s suggestions for economic reforms naturally had direct bearing on vital economic problems of his day. But to regard them only as effectual cures for contemporaneous economic ills would be to miss the immense historical significance of his approach. In economic questions, as in every other sphere, his approach was invariably informed by an objective analysis of the play of forces that had brought about a given situation, or thrown up a particular problem. And time and again, his superb sense of historical perspective, amounting to genius, enabled Rammohun to pick out for support the “power-charge”, those factors which carried the potential to provide the forward thrust to society.

A close study of his position in regard to the question of colonization of Europeans will serve to illustrate the point. Rammohun supported colonization, not because of any misplaced faith in individual European trader or planter’s moral rectitude, but because collectively the traders represented the only force capable

of breaking the East India Company's monopolistic stranglehold which was stifling India's economic life. The presence of the East India Company could not be wished away. Rammohun recognised that the British had come to India not by anyone's leave or invitation, but by the driving power of historical forces. They had come in search of profit and stayed to rule. Their purpose could best be served by exploiting India as the supplier of raw material for factories in England and the buyer of goods manufactured in England. It would require a difficult feat of the imagination to suppose that the officials of the East India Company suffered from troubled conscience because such imports, particularly of textiles, were ruining the cottage industry in this country.

The zamindars, as we have already noted, were the natural allies of the Company in their desire to maintain the status quo. Neither group—though each for its own reason—could be expected to welcome, much less actively initiate, the process of industrialization. Yet, industrialization was the only force which could put life into the moribund Indian economy. Rammohun saw clearly that free trade and its agency, the European settlers, could serve as a dynamite to blast away the millstone of the Company's monopoly that hung around India's neck. Rammohun knew, of course, that the settlers would prove to be just as acquisitive as the Company's servants. But he also knew that, spurred by the desire for gain, the settlers would set up industrial plants and set in train an industrial revolution. Unlike the Company which was only interested in encouraging such agricultural produce as could be utilized in British factories at that time, the settlers would diversify agricultural production, thus giving fresh impetus to agriculture as a whole.

In supporting free trade and European colonization, Rammohun's interest was to press into service European capital and technology for the economic development of India. Upto that stage, the presence of the West had manifested itself only in naked exploitation. Rammohun wanted to utilize Western capital and technology as an aid to India's economic development.

Vision of A Free India

AS IN other fields, foresight marked Rammohun's political thought and action. As Bepin Chandra Pal points out, one of Rammohun's most favourite texts was that which declared the essential divinity of man as man. Man was, by his very nature and constitution, 'eternally free'. To deny this freedom was an outrage upon his nature and a sin against his Maker. This was the fundamental philosophy of Rammohun.

The Rev. William Adam also testified to Rammohun's burning passion for freedom in these words: "He (Rammohun) would be free or not be at all. This love for freedom, so strikingly characteristic of the man, was a rational conviction springing from his belief in the noble purposes which a well-regulated and self-restrained liberty is capable of conferring on the individual and on society."

In this context it will be recalled that even in his teens, Rammohun felt the loss of freedom of his country through British domination so keenly that he had resolved to leave India. It was only after maturer consideration that he veered round to the view that British rule, "though a foreign yoke, would lead more speedily and surely to the amelioration of the Indian people."

Rammohun, as we have already seen, was a close student of political developments in Europe and America. It was his fond belief that association with Britain will bring "the Indian mind in living contact with modern world culture and establish a system of modern

democratic Government in the country, which will bring India up to the level of other civilized and free countries of the world". On the other hand, he could never countenance the thought of an unending subjection of India by Britain.

Mr. Arnot, who was his Secretary in England left on record that Rammohun had set forty years as the time-limit within which England's "cultural and humanitarian mission" should be worked out. Pointing out that Rammohun "was the first to deliver the message of political freedom to India", Bepin Chandra Pal explained that his outstanding contribution towards the political advancement of his people was the new "self-consciousness and self-confidence" he tried to create in his countrymen "by his multifarious works—theological, social, educational and juridical." This is another way of saying that he had never lost sight of the inter-dependence of religious and educational reforms and social and political progress. Bepin Chandra Pal underscored this when he said: "He (Rammohun) was the first to affiliate political and social freedom to religious and spiritual emancipation and to initiate the present Freedom Movement in all its aspects in modern India."

Rammohun's unshakable faith in the ability, intelligence and capability of his countrymen to attain the same heights as was reached by any other civilized nation was implicit in all that he wrote and did in regard to political reforms. As Bepin Chandra Pal said, "personal self-respect and national self-respect were the two most powerful forces" that worked behind Rammohun's "relations with people of other races and cultures". He never allowed any slighting remarks about Indians from any quarters to pass unchallenged. Rammohun pulled up sharply one of his adversaries for suggesting that Indians were "degraded by Asiatic effeminacy" and that India was obliged to England for even "a ray of intelligence". He reminded the arrogant author that almost all prophets and patriarchs venerated by Christians were Asiatics. As for the "ray of intelligence" Rammohun said that he would express his gratitude to the British for the introduction of "useful mechanical arts".

But this in no way altered the fact that the “world was indebted to our ancestors for the first dawn of knowledge”. The contribution of India in philosophy and literature was second to none.

As Rammohun strove with all his might and main to instil in his own countrymen confidence and self-esteem in a variety of ways, he never failed to take action against any administrative measure that was detrimental to national interest. In point of fact, his agitation against certain invidious features of the Jury Act passed in 1827, his fight against the restrictive Press Ordinance and the Regulation passed in 1828 giving arbitrary powers to revenue officers were the first collective political action in the modern sense.

Trial by jury was introduced in India in 1726, with the establishment of the Mayors’ Courts. The practice was continued when the Supreme Court replaced the Mayors’ Courts in 1774.

Then, in 1826, the British Parliament passed the first piece of legislation on the subject—the Indian Jury Bill. Under the provision of the Act, Indians were allowed to sit on Petty Juries. The mischief of the Act lay in the fact that it debarred the Indians from sitting on Grand Juries and neither Hindus nor Muslims could serve as Jurors in cases where Christians were being tried. Rammohun protested against this, not only because it discriminated against Indians, but also because it introduced the pernicious element of “religious distinction into the judicial system of the country”. Rammohun initiated a petition, which was signed by distinguished Hindus and Muslims, which was submitted to the British Parliament in 1829. In a striking passage, he brought out sharply the head and front of the grievance of the Hindus and Muslims. The relevant passage read: “In his famous Jury Bill, Mr. Wynn, the late President of the Board of Control, has by introducing religious distinctions into the judicial system in this country, not only afforded just grounds for dissatisfaction among the natives in general, but has excited much alarm in the breast of everyone concerned with political principles. Any natives, either Hindu or Mohammedan, are rendered by this Bill, subject to judicial trial by Christians, either European or Native,

while Christians, including Native converts, are exempt from the degradation of being tried either by a Hindu or a Mussulman juror, however high he may stand in the estimation of society. This Bill also denies both to Hindus and Mohammedans the honour of a seat in the Grand Jury even in the trial of fellow-Hindus or Mussulmans. This is the sum total of Mr. Wynn's late Jury Bill, of which we bitterly complain." Asserting that Government must hold the balance even in respect of all communities, Rammohun expressed the view that "if it were indeed necessary to protect the Christian population of Calcutta from the possible operation of Hindu and Mohammedan prejudices in the administration of criminal justice, surely it would be at least equally necessary to protect Mohammedans and Hindus from the operation of Christian prejudices."

Though the petition failed to move the British Parliament, the matter was taken up by Mr. Grant, the then President of the Board of Control. The Directors of the East India Company, as was to be expected, were up in arms against Grant's proposed Bill. Happily, Rammohun was in England at the time and helped strengthen Grant's hands by refuting the arguments of the Company's Directors. Grant's Bill was passed in 1832, making Hindus and Muslims eligible not only to sit both on Petty and Grand Juries but also for appointment as Justices of the Peace. The paper of the Seerampore Missionaries, *Samachar Darpan*, recorded in glowing terms Rammohun's part in the passage of Grant's Bill.

Yet another evidence of Rammohun's constant vigil against bureaucracy's arrogation of unbridled powers to itself was provided by his protest against the introduction of a Regulation in 1828. Under this decree, the Revenue Officer in each district was authorized to dispossess the holders of tax-free land, solely on his own authority, without having recourse to a court of law. Rammohun quickly submitted a petition of protest against this further encroachment upon the rights of the individual.

These examples undoubtedly point to the modern democratic political outlook of Rammohun, but they do not present a full view

of the breadth of his political vision. For this, one must turn to a series of communications or replies to the questions asked by the Parliamentary Select Committee formed in 1831 in connection with the renewal of the Charter of the East India Company. These answers, apart from being recorded in the “Blue Book” were embodied in a separate book, published in London under the title “Exposition of the practical operations of the Judicial and Revenue system of India and the General Character and condition of its Native Inhabitants as submitted in Evidence to the authorities in England”. His replies concerning administrative and judicial reforms, when taken together, were a constitution in embryo, designed to associate Indian opinion with policy-making, and increasing Indian participation at higher levels of the administration-in short, taking actual steps towards eventual self-government. Among the specific steps recommended by him were the appointment of Indian assessors in the Civil Courts; appointment of Indian Judges to sit on the Bench with English Judges, codification of Civil and Criminal laws, separation of the Executive from the Judiciary functions, reduction in the Government’s expenditure and the abolition of the standing army and the formation of a militia, composed of peasants.

Rammohun might be living in the twentieth century and passing as a radical.

Commenting on the recommendations, the *Samachar Darpan* rightly wrote: “Should he be instrumental in securing these advantages to the country, not only the present but every future age will justly consider him a benefactor to the country.”

The Report of the Select Committee on the Company’s Charter was completed and presented to Parliament after its recommendations were reviewed by the Court of Directors. They were finally drafted as a Bill which received Royal assent in 1833. Although the new Charter represented vast improvement over the previous one, and reflected many of Rammohun’s ideas, his English biographer, Miss Collet, felt that “possibly the terms of the new

Charter were not to Rammohun's mind". For one thing, Rammohun's suggestion that "a few of the most distinguished individuals in the European and native community" be consulted for suggestions in enacting new measures had found no mention in the Charter. His disappointment notwithstanding, the country stood to gain from the new Charter and giving credit for this where it was due, the *Bengal Spectator* wrote in 1842: "It is to him (Rammohun) that we are in a great measure indebted for the concessions in regard to the privileges contained in the late Charter (1833)."

Freedom of the Press

SURENDRANATH BANERJEE has described Rammohun as “the first political agitator”. He had worked tirelessly, not only for increasing democratization of the administration in India, but he also helped forge that indispensable instrument for the working of democracy—a powerful press.

The press in India had its lowly birth in 1780, with the publication of the *Bengal Gazette*, more popularly known as *Hickey's Gazette*, after its founder. Although it began by declaring that it was to function as a political and commercial paper “open to all parties but influenced by none”, it soon degenerated into a scandal-sheet.

In the main, Hickey confined himself to the portrayal of the life of the European community in Calcutta. His forte was reporting scandal and even Governor-General Warren Hastings and his wife did not escape the barbs from Hickey's slanderous pen.

Before long, other Europeans followed in the footsteps of Hickey and nearly half a dozen publications made their appearance. All of them were promoted by Europeans and until 1816 there was not a single Indian-owned or edited paper in the country. It should be remembered that all these publications were purely commercial ventures and were neither committed to a cause nor interested in disseminating information which could be of interest to the serious reader.

Government's attitude towards the press was one of implacable animosity from the start and its policy was a combination

of severe discouragement on the one side and strict control on the other. It was not so much the concern for Indian public opinion but the fear of their misdeeds being known to the Company's Board of Directors that gave rise to the hostility of the officials towards the press.

Indian journalism reached a turning point with the launching of the *Bengal Gazette* in 1816. This was the first Indian-owned newspaper in English and was edited by Gangadhar Bhattacharya, a school teacher and a devoted follower of Rammohun Roy. Authoritative historians of Indian journalism take the view that there are good reasons to believe that Rammohun was the moving spirit behind the venture. Recalling that Rammohun had, about that time, withdrawn his name from the list of sponsors of the Hindu College in the face of opposition from the orthodox section of the Hindus, these writers suggest that Rammohun might have avoided an open association with the first venture in Indian journalism in the interest of the *Bengal Gazette* itself. At all events, it is certain that Gangadhar and his supporters were enthusiastic members of Rammohun's Atmiya Sabha.

This paper was the first to represent a definite school of thought in regard to political and social issues; this new departure also characterized the celebrated *Sambad Kaumadi*, the weekly Bengali journal that began publication under the editorship of Rammohun himself in 1821. The serious tone and temper of *Sambad Kaumadi* can best be seen from the contents of the earlier numbers. They included an appeal to the Government against the export of rice from Bengal, for the establishment of a free school for the benefit of impecunious Hindus, for the introduction of the jury system in the mofussil, zila and provincial courts and a strong protest against Europeans driving their carriages recklessly through Indian crowds and using their whips to cut their way through.

A study of the contents of *Mirat-ul-Akhbar*, the Persian paper started by Rammohun for the benefit of those Indians who did not know English or Bengali, will prove equally revealing. To give a

suggestive list, the *Mirat* carried articles on crop forecast, the exploits of Ranjit Singh, shipping intelligence, the trial of John Hayes, Judge of Tipperah, and on the differences with China.

It is of transcendent importance to remember that all the publications that Rammohun started espoused important causes—social, religious and political. It was he who endowed the press with a social purpose. The crusading tradition that he established grew into a mighty power during the freedom movement.

Rammohun had begun the publication of his paper when the climate, so far as the Government's attitude was concerned, was comparatively propitious. In 1814, the Marquis of Hastings attempted to reframe the draconian Press Regulations which were in force since the days of Lord Wellesley. To an extent, the rigours of the rules were mitigated. But the small mercies extended to the press were not destined to last long. The die-hard conservatives among the officials, who were apparently held in check by Hastings, returned to their self-appointed task of restraining the press as soon as Hastings left India. Mr. J. Adam who became Acting Governor-General made a major move in the matter in 1823 by serving an externment order on the first among the British liberal journalists, J. S. Buckingham. He was directed to leave India within two months and his licence to "proceed to the East Indies" was revoked. Adam followed this up by issuing in March, 1823 a rigorous Press Ordinance, under which proprietors and editors of newspapers had to take out licences for running their papers. These licences were to be issued on the basis of affidavits made by editors accepting certain pre-conditions, and the slightest infringement of the rules could result in licences being revoked. In compliance with the law, the Rules were laid before the Supreme Court on March 15, 1823. Two days later, Rammohun, Dwarkanath Tagore and three others made a petition to the Supreme Court objecting to the rule. The petition was rejected out of hand and the judge made no bones of the fact that even before he had heard the petition he had made up his mind to put the Rule on the Statute book.

The petition drafted by Rammohun was described by Miss Collet as “the Areopagitica of Indian history” and was an impassioned defence of the freedom of the Press. It said :

“A complete stop will be put to the diffusion of knowledge and the consequent mental improvement now going on, either by translations into the popular dialects of this country from the learned languages of the East, or by the circulation of literary intelligence drawn from foreign publications.

Another evil of equal importance in the eyes of a just Ruler is that it will also preclude the natives from making the Government readily acquainted with the errors and injustice that may be committed by its Executive Officers in the various parts of their extensive country, and it will also preclude the natives from communicating frankly and honestly to their Gracious Sovereign in England and his Council, the real conditions of His Majesty’s faithful subjects in this distant part of his dominions, and the treatment they experience from the local Government. Since such information cannot in future be conveyed to England, as it has heretofore been, either by the translation from the native publications inserted in the English newspapers printed here and sent to Europe, or by the English publications which the natives themselves had in contemplation to establish before this Rule and Ordinance was proposed.

Every good Ruler, who is convinced of the imperfection of human nature, and reverences the Eternal Governor of the world, must be conscious of the great liability to error in managing the affairs of a vast empire; and therefore he will be anxious to afford to every individual the readiest means of bringing to his notice whatever may require his interference. To secure this important object, the unrestrained liberty of publication is the only effectual means that can be employed.”

Following the rejection of the petition, the Press Regulation was promulgated and in protest Rammohun stopped the publication

of *Mirat-ul-Akhbar*. Incidentally, W.B. Bayley, a member of the Governor-General's Council who strongly supported the Press Regulation, had singled out the *Mirat* for attack, in justification of his stand.

Undeterred by the decision of the Supreme Court, Rammohun appealed to the King-in-Council. A remarkable and bold observation in that Appeal read :

“If these conclusions, drawn from the particular circumstances of this country, be met with such an argument as that a colony or distant dependency can never safely be entrusted with the liberty of the Press, and that therefore Natives of Bengal cannot be allowed to exercise the privileges they have so long enjoyed, this would be in other words to tell them, that they are condemned to perpetual oppression and degradation from which they can have no hope of being raised during the existence of the British power.

If your Majesty's faithful subjects could conceive for a moment that the British nation, actuated solely by interested policy, considered India merely as a valuable property and nothing but the best means of securing its possession and turning it to advantage, even then it would be of importance to ascertain whether this property be well taken care of by their servants; therefore the existence of a free Press is equally necessary for the sake of the Governors and the governed.”

The enlightened Buckingham who was in England at the time entered an appeal against the Press Regulation. These efforts met with no better fate than the appeal before the Supreme Court. Even after Rammohun had proceeded to England, his associates, particularly Dwarkanath Tagore did not relax their efforts to win freedom for the Press and ultimately Sir Charles Metcalf, as Governor-General, responding to a petition from Dwarkanath and others rescinded the Press Regulation in 1838. Though Rammohun was gone by then, his valiant fight for the freedom of the press

was remembered in the toast that was raised at the Free Press Dinner given at the Calcutta Town Hall to felicitate Sir Charles. The abiding quality of the principles that Rammohun had propounded in regard to the freedom of the press was mirrored in the extensive quotations from his writings on the subject in the Report of the Press Commission appointed by the Government of free India.

Visit to England

RAMMOHUN'S ABIDING interest in European culture and political ideas was kindled, as we have seen, when he was in the employ of John Digby in Rangpur. In Digby's own words, Rammohun was "in the constant habit of reading English newspapers of which the continental politics chiefly interested him". That Rammohun had developed keen desire to visit the West at about the same time is evident from a letter he had written to Digby to say, "You may depend upon my setting off for England within a short period of time; and if you do not return to India before October next, you will most probably receive a letter from me, informing you of the exact time of my departure for England". Rammohun wanted to see for himself the unfolding of the mighty drama in Europe and recorded the purpose behind the intended visit to England in these words in his autobiographical note: "I now felt a strong desire to visit Europe, and obtain, by personal observation, a more thorough insight into its manners, customs, religion, and political institutions." But the stupendous task at home far out-weighed his desire for travel and Rammohun had to defer his European trip for twelve long years.

A new opportunity presented itself when the Emperor of Delhi, Akbar II, appointed Rammohun as Imperial Envoy to the Court of England to move the British Crown against the inadequacy of the stipend given to the Emperor by the East India Company. As a mark of dignity and distinction attaching to the office of the Envoy, the Emperor conferred on Rammohun the title of Raja.

For reasons which are not far to seek, the East India Company refused to recognize the appointment and the title. If the Company officials had entertained the slightest hope that this would deflect Rammohun from his course, they were in for a jolt. Rammohun promptly wrote to the Governor-General to say that he, Rammohun, had “resolved to proceed to that land of liberty by one of the vessels that will sail in November, and from a due regard to the purport of the late Mr. Secretary Sterling’s letter of 15th January last, and other considerations, I have determined not to appear there as the Envoy of His Majesty, Akbar the Second, but as a private individual”.

Incidentally, the fact that he visited England as a private individual did not prevent Rammohun from pressing for and obtaining an upward revision of the Emperor’s stipend. There were, however, other reasons, immeasurably more significant in their historic import which had made Rammohun’s presence in England imperative. On this point it would be best to let Rammohun speak. He wrote: “I embarked for England, as the discussions of the East India Company’s Charter were expected to come in, by which the treatment of the natives of India would be determined for many years to come, and an appeal to the King-in-Council, against the abolition of the practice of burning was to be heard before the Privy Council.” It is quite clear from this that Rammohun was anxious that his viewpoint would be heard by the British Parliament and the Privy Council both in regard to the renewal of the Company’s Charter and the Suttee Act. How opportune Rammohun’s visit to England at that juncture was, is seen in the universal acknowledgement that Rammohun’s ‘communications’ to the Select Committee were largely responsible for the inclusion of the salutary clauses in the new Charter. It remains to be said though that Rammohun submitted a counterpetition drafted by him and signed by many eminent Indians to the Privy Council, strongly supporting Bentinck’s measure, contemporary accounts say that when the Privy Councillors heard the appeal at the Council Chamber in White Hall, Rammohun “sat near their Lordships” and had the satisfaction of seeing the appeal

thrown out. There can be no doubt that Rammohun's presence in England helped materially in bringing to the notice of the Privy Councillors his authoritative view that the burning of widows had no religious sanction.

The high esteem in which Rammohun was held by the learned among his contemporaries can be gleaned from a letter of Mr. J. Young written to introduce Rammohun to Jeremy Bentham. Young began by saying, "If I were beside you, and could explain matters fully, you would comprehend the greatness of the undertaking—his going on board the ship to a foreign and distant land, a thing hitherto not to be named among Hindoos, and least of all among Brahmins." Young went on to say that "the good which this excellent and extra-ordinary man has already effected by his writings cannot be told" and concluded by adding that "it is no small compliment to such a man that even a Governor-General like the present, who though a man of the most honest intentions, suspects everyone and trusts nobody, and who knows that Rammohun Roy disapproves of many of the acts of the Government, should have shown him so much respect as to furnish him with introductions to friends of rank and political influence in England."

Rammohun's voyage to England on the *Albion*, which took close upon six months, was marked by two incidents; the involvement in a nasty accident, causing permanent injury to his leg, and his visit to a French frigate which was under the revolutionary flag. Shortly before he sailed for England he had read about the success of the French Revolution of 1830. The humanistic and egalitarian spirit of the Revolution had fired his imagination and he hailed the event as a triumph of human liberty. On the testimony of his friends and contemporaries, "so great was his enthusiasm that he could think and talk of nothing else". When the *Albion* sailed into Table Bay, two French ships lay in anchor, proudly flying the tricolour, the flag of liberty. Though he was still nursing a painful injury which had lamed him for some time, Rammohun insisted on being carried on board one of the French ships. The French received

him with warmth and enthusiasm and conducted him beneath the tricolour. Rammohun saluted the flag with deep reverence and in his exuberance cried, “Glory, glory, glory to France!”

Rammohun’s fame had spread far and wide in England long before he set foot on English soil. One of the notable persons who was eagerly waiting to meet him in person when he disembarked in Liverpool was William Roscoe, the noted historian. Roscoe had chanced upon “The Precepts of Jesus” and was struck by the similarity of the ideas developed by Rammohun and those that he himself had expounded in a book entitled “Christian Morality”. Anxious to communicate with Rammohun, Roscoe had placed in the hands of a friend called Fletcher, who was sailing to India, a letter for Rammohun and some of his own books as mementos. In this letter, aglow with warmth and admiration, Roscoe wrote : “We have, for some time past, been flattered with the hopes of seeing you in this Kingdom, but I fear I am not destined to have that pleasure. At all events, it will be a great gratification to me if I should survive the attacks of the paralytic complaints, under which I have now laboured for some years, till I hear that you have received this very sincere mark of the deep respect and attachment I have so long entertained for you.”

Rammohun had left India before the letter could reach him. By the time he reached Liverpool, Roscoe was practically on his death-bed. Roscoe’s sons who met Rammohun with an earnest request that he should call on the distinguished historian have left a touching account of the first meeting between the two intellectual giants in Roscoe’s sick chamber. Recording that both were very much moved and that Rammohun came away from the meeting with “agitated countenance and moistened eyes”, Roscoe’s sons stated: “The interview will never be forgotten.” Their conversation “chiefly turned upon the objects which had led Rammohun Roy to this country, and in the course of it he displayed an intimate acquaintance with the political and commercial state of England.”

Rammohun’s stay in Liverpool was brief. He hastened to London so as to be present in the British capital during the debate

on the Reforms Bill—a measure to which he attached the greatest importance. Of this, more later.

Rammohun arrived in London late in the evening, and one of the first to call on him the very same night was no less a person than Jeremy Bentham, the utilitarian philosopher. Full of years, the philosopher came out of the seclusion of his own home after many years to call at Rammohun's hotel. As it happened, Bentham reached the hotel long after Rammohun had retired; so he left a note reading "Jeremy Bentham to his friend Rammohun Roy". They met afterwards and Bentham grew to like Rammohun so much that he frequently referred to the latter as an "intensely admired and dearly beloved collaborator in the service of mankind." Another celebrity whom Rammohun met in England was Robert Owen, the father of British Socialism.

Rammohun's reception in the official circles in Britain was no less remarkable. He was introduced in the House of Lords by the King's brother, the Duke of Cumberland. The peers whom Rammohun could count among his close personal friends included the King's brother, the Duke of Sussex, the Duke of Devonshire, the Earl of Munster whom Rammohun had earlier met in India, and Lord Brougham, the well-known supporter of popular education and abolition of slavery. At the coronation of William IV, Rammohun had a seat assigned to him among the Ambassadors of the Crowned Heads of Europe. That Rammohun's title as well as his ambassadorial assignment was ultimately recognised was indicated in the Court Circular which stated that "at the levee held at the Palace, St. James's, on the 7th September (1831), the Raja Rammohun Roy was introduced to an audience of the King (William IV) by the Rt. Hon. Charles Grant, the President of the Board of Control, and was most graciously received."

The first among the numerous receptions held in his honour was organized by the British Utilitarian Association. Sir John Bowring, the biographer of Jeremy Bentham and editor of his works, in a resolution moved "that Raja Rammohun Roy, be hereby certified

of our sympathy in his arduous and philanthropic labours, of our admiration of his character ... that the magnanimous and beneficent course which he has marked out of himself and hitherto consistently pursued, will entitle him to the blessings of his countrymen and of mankind”

Dr. Kircland, ex-President of Harvard University who followed Sir John said: “The Raja was an object of lively interest in America” and was “expected there with the greatest anxiety”.

Even the Directors of the East India Company felt it necessary to give a reception in honour of Rammohun. The Chairman of the Company, presiding over the function, in his speech said: “The Brahman collected from the boundless stores of knowledge, to which from travels and study he had access, the richest intellectual treasures”.

The stir that was created by the arrival in England of Rammohun was by no means confined either to the intelligentsia or dignitaries of the State. Mr. James Sutherland, who was at one time the Principal of the Hoogly College, narrated that “as soon as it was known in London that the great Brahman philosopher had arrived, the most distinguished men in the country crowded to pay their respects to him; and he had scarcely got into his lodgings in Regent Street, when his door was besieged with carriages from eleven in the morning till four in the afternoon”. Rammohun “caught the tone of the day and vehemently discussed politics with everyone”. As this began to tell on his health, his physicians had to issue orders to his footman not to admit visitors.

The India Gazette of 1834 which published extensive reports on Rammohun’s tour of Britain, gave a very interesting account of his visit to some of the factories in Manchester, en route to London from Liverpool. Men and women stopped working to throng around him and the “aid of the police was required to make way for him to the manufacturies, and when he entered, it was necessary to close and bolt the gate to keep out the mob.”

As in England, so in France Rammohun was widely known in the cultured circles. D'Acosta, the editor of the *Calcutta Times*, had forwarded to Abbe Gregorie, Bishop of Blois, some of Rammohun's publications together with an account of Rammohun's life. Abbe Gregorie, in turn, wrote a pamphlet in which he spoke of Rammohun's "profound knowledge of the sacred books of the Hindoos" and the sacrifices he had made in the pursuit of his ideals, which "cannot be encouraged or admired too warmly". The celebrated French scholar, Sismondi, in an article on the institution of caste and Suttee in the *Revue Encyclopedique* wrote ; "A glorious reform has, however, begun to spread among the Hindoos One of the most virtuous and enlightened of men, Rammohun Roy, is exerting himself to restore his countrymen to the worship of the true God, and to the union of morality and religion ... He communicates to the Hindoos all the progress that thought has made among the Europeans". After painstaking research, Madame L. Morin has established that on the 5th July, 1824, the title of associate-correspondent was conferred on Rammohun Roy by that learned and scientific body, the Societe Asiatique of Paris. She also unearthed two contemporary journals which reported that Rammohun, when he was in France, was presented to King Louis Philippe by the usher of the Ambassadors on October 14, 1832.

In the words of Max Muller, "Rammohun Roy was the first who came from the East to the West, the first to join hands and complete that world-wide circle through which henceforth, like an electric current, Oriental thought could run to the West, and Western thought return to the East."

Rammohun arrived in England at a most momentous period. A new England was emerging from the old and "in him the New England first became acquainted with the New India". He saw the East India Company being transformed from a trading company to a political organization and the passage of the Act which ended slavery throughout the British Dominion and the passage of the Reforms Bill which deepened the base of British democracy.

Rammohun followed with close attention and unbounded enthusiasm the fate of the Bill from its first introduction by Lord John Russel in March 1831. The aim behind the Bill was to transform Britain from a virtual oligarchy to a more broad-based democracy and to ensure that persons and not property should be represented in Parliament. In Rammohun's view, the struggle was not merely between "Reformers and anti-Reformers", but as he wrote to a friend "between liberty and oppression throughout the world, between justice and injustice, and between right and wrong. But we clearly perceive that liberal principles in politics and religion have been long gradually but steadily gaining ground, notwithstanding the opposition and obstinacy of despots and bigots".

Lord Russel's Bill was defeated in the Committee when Rammohun was nearing England. The Second Bill was passed by the House of Commons but rejected by the Lords. The whole country was convulsed by a terrific agitation and amidst great excitement the Third Reforms Bill was once more put up before the House of Lords after being passed by the Commons. Rammohun who had hurried from Liverpool to London to be present at the debate shared "the agony of suspense" of the British public. He postponed his visit to Bristol and impatiently waited to know the outcome.

The Lords finally passed the Bill in June, 1832. Rammohun was overjoyed. He wrote to his friend, Mr. William Rathbons, "I am now happy on the complete success of the Reforms Bill, notwithstanding the violent opposition and want of political principle on the part of the aristocrats. The nation can no longer be a prey of the few who used to fill their purses at the expenses, nay, to the ruin of the people, for a period upward of fifty years. As I publicly avowed that in the event of the Reforms Bill being defeated, I would renounce my connection with this country. Thank Heaven, I can now feel proud of being one of your fellow subjects, and heartily rejoice that I have the infinite happiness of witnessing the salvation of the nation, nay of the whole world."

Rammohun's approach to the Reforms Bill in England was one more manifestation of the very basis of his socio-political thinking. Speaking at the centenary celebrations of Rammohun, Sarojini Naidu elucidated this point in these memorable words : “Raja Rammohun Roy understood that the narrowness of patriotism, the limitations of sympathy, the pride of race, the arrogance of religions, doctrines and dogmas, the barriers of rituals and different methods of worship, constituted obstacles in the progress of humanity. He realized and preached the gospel of unity for the salvation of divided humanity. And, therefore, making no difference between sect and sect, sex and sex, race and race, religion and religion, nation and nation, culture and culture, civilization and civilization, history and history, language and language, of whatever country, he preached that our destiny is bound by a common purpose, a common sacrifice and a common suffering in the crucible of endeavours and aspirations, for the sake of attaining an indivisible humanity. That was the greatest lesson that he taught us.”

Rammohun was a universal man, the prototype of great man in the new Age. It is hardly necessary to add that his universal outlook was born of a far-sighted historical perspective and was the opposite of the colourless sentimental cosmopolitanism devoid of moorings or meaning. He knew that the curtailment of human rights anywhere was a threat to peoples everywhere and the assertion of freedom in one country was a gain for others.

Rabindranath Tagore said: “Rammohun was the only person in his time, in the whole world of man, to realize the significance of the Modern Age. He knew that the ideal of human civilization does not lie in the isolation of independence, but in the brotherhood or interdependence of individuals as well as nations in all spheres of thought and activity.”

C.F. Andrews pointed out that “not only did he give us the ideal of progress of his own country but he also laid down the lines which East and West must follow if they would come at last, on the basis of true equality, that should embrace all mankind.”

Rammohun's impassioned interest in and ardent support to the Reforms Bill proceeded from his unbounded love for freedom. Precisely the same spirit moved him to support the struggle of the people of Naples in their fight against their oppressors, a foreign monarch. It was evident equally in his support to the colonials in Spanish South America in their struggle for independence, and the efforts of the Greeks to throw off Turkish yoke. He wrote strongly against the British occupation of Ireland in his Persian paper *Mirat-ul-Akhbar* and sent money to Ireland to help fight famine there.

In about 1816, a society called 'Carbonari' was founded in Naples. It became very popular, and in 1820-21 the Neapolitan Carbonari broke out in rebellion against the Bourbon Kings of Naples. The rebels demanded a Constitution guaranteeing equality among all classes, and the right of the people to decide their destiny. The uprising was crushed and Morelli and Silvati, two leaders of the insurrection were hanged. This news depressed Rammohun so much that, cancelling an engagement with Mr. Silk Buckingham, he wrote on the 11th August, 1821 to say: "I am afraid I must be under the necessity of denying myself the pleasure of your society this evening; more especially as my mind is depressed by the late news from Europe. From the late unhappy news I am obliged to conclude that I shall not live to see liberty universally restored to the nations of Europe, and Asiatic nations, especially those that are European colonies, possessed of a greater degree of the same blessing than what they now enjoy.

Under these circumstances I consider the cause of the Neapolitans as my own and their enemies as ours. Enemies of liberty and friends of despotism have never been and never will be ultimately successful."

In 1821, when the news of the establishment of a constitutional Government in Spain reached Rammohun, he celebrated the event by giving a dinner at the Town Hall in Calcutta. When asked by a friend why he should bother to give a dinner on the occasion, Rammohun replied: "What! Ought I to be insensible to the sufferings

of my fellow-creatures, wherever they are or however unconnected by interests, religion or language ?”

In the unrelenting struggles carried on for years by the forces of liberalism against the autocratic regimes existing in various countries of the world, Rammohun Roy’s sympathies were always with the forces of liberalism. After the victory of the Spanish liberals, when a new Spanish Constitution was adopted in 1812 A.D., the Philippine Company, the publisher of this Constitution, dedicated it to Rammohun Roy. The memorable words of the dedication written in Spanish, made it known to the people of Spain that the Constitution was dedicated to the “most liberal, noble, wise and virtuous Brahman, Rammohun Roy.”

Rammohun had cherished deep admiration for France as a country “favoured by Nature, richly adorned by the cultivation of the arts and sciences” and most important, “blessed by the possession of a free Constitution”. After about eleven months’ stay in England, towards the end of 1831, he made up his mind to visit France. The fact that intending foreign visitors had to obtain passports to enter France was a rude shock and a profound disappointment. Rammohun protested, pointing out that such “restrictions against foreigners are not observed even among the nations of Asia”. He did not understand how the French, who were noted for their “courtesy and liberality in all other matters” could place much restrictions on foreign visitors. Though at first he gave up the idea of visiting France, the lure of a Free France proved, irresistible. While reluctantly applying for a passport, he addressed a letter to Talleyrand, the French Foreign Minister, calling for the removal of “all impediments to human intercourse for the promotion of the reciprocal advantage and enjoyment of the whole human race”. Rammohun argued that “it is now generally admitted that not religion only but unbiased common sense as well as the accurate deductions of scientific research lead to the conclusion that all mankind are one great family of which numerous nations and tribes existing are only various branches. Hence enlightened men in all

countries feel a wish to encourage and facilitate human intercourse in every manner by removing as far as possible all impediments to it in order to promote the reciprocal advantage and enjoyment of the whole human race”.

Then followed the prophetic pronouncement—anticipating by almost a century the creation of the League of Nations and the United Nations Organization.

His imperishable words are: “It appears to me the ends of constitutional government might be better attained by submitting every matter of political difference between two countries to a Congress composed of an equal number from the Parliament of each: the decision of the majority to be acquiesced in by both nations and the Chairman to be chosen by each Nation alternately, for one year, and the place of meeting to be one year within the limits of one country and next within those of the other; such as at Dover and Calais for England and France.

By such a Congress all matters of difference, whether political or commercial, affecting the Natives of any two civilized countries with constitutional Governments, might be settled amicably and justly to the satisfaction of both and profound peace and friendly feelings might be preserved between them from generation to generation.”

In recording the fact that Rammohun was the first man to visualize a world body for arbitrating in disputes between two nations, it is difficult to resist the temptation to recall Francis Bacon’s sage remarks about broad objectives that motivate men, and their qualitative differences. Bacon says: “It will not be amiss to distinguish the three kinds (of men) and the grades of ambition in mankind. The first is of those who desire to extend their own power in their native country; which kind is vulgar and degenerate. The second is of those who labour to extend the power of their own country and its domain among men. This certainly has more dignity, though not less covetousness. But if men endeavour to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race itself ... this ambition (if

ambition it can be called) is without doubt a more wholesome thing and more noble than the other two.”

In truth, Rammohun stands in history as the living bridge over which India marches from her unmeasured past to her incalculable future. He was the arch which spanned the gulf that yawned between ancient caste and modern humanity, between superstition and science, between despotism and democracy, between immobile custom and a conservative progress, between polytheism and theism. He was the mediator of his people, harmonizing in his own person, often by means of his own solitary sufferings, the conflicting tendencies of immemorial tradition and an inevitable enlightenment.

He embodies the new spirit which arises from the compulsory mixture of races and faiths and civilizations,—he embodies its freedom of enquiry, its thirst for science, its large human sympathy, its pure and sifted ethics along with its reverent but not uncritical regard for the past.

He led the way “from the orientalism of the past, not to but through Western culture, towards a civilization which is neither Western nor Eastern, but something vastly larger and nobler than both... The European and Asiatic streams of human development, which have often tinged each other before, are now approaching a confluence which bids fair to form the one-ocean-river of the collective progress of mankind.”

Rammohun’s whole life was an unending pursuit of synthesis on a grand scale. Dr. Brajendra Nath Seal sums up Rammohun’s basic approach to life thus : “He based his reforms, social or political, agrarian or industrial, on a criticism of social life, on ulterior postulates and concepts, in which he effected a synthesis between the East and the West. His synthesis of the historic religions was thus completed by a synthesis of Eastern and Western cultures and civilizations, which the historic situation forced upon him as a vital necessity. As in the sphere of speculation he strove to reconcile

individual reason with collective wisdom and scriptural authority, so in the sphere of social construction he aimed at reconciling the good of the individual with the good of the greatest number, in other words, at harmonising individualism and socialism.”

It is by no means too fanciful to suggest that when Rammohun lay in his sick-bed in Bristol, stricken by a mortal disease on his return to England from France, there came to him “the vision of a free, puissant and enlightened India, the civiliser and enlightener of Asiatic nationalities, a golden link between the Far East and the Far West, a vision as emblematic of the past, as it was prophetic of the future history of Humanity.”

A number of eminent physicians and kindly friends attended on Rammohun Roy during his last days. Illness came rather suddenly on the 19th September, with high fever and severe headache. In the following days his condition deteriorated rapidly and Raja Rammohun Roy drew his last breath at 2:25 hours on the 27th September, 1833.

Letter to the French Foreign Minister

To

DIE MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF FRANCE, PARIS

Sir,

You may be surprised at receiving a letter from a foreigner, the Native of a country situated many thousand miles from France, and I assuredly would not now have trespassed on your attention, were I not induced by a sense of what I consider due to myself and by the respect I feel towards a country standing in the foremost rank of free and civilized nations.

2nd. For twelve years past I have entertained a wish (as noticed, I think, in several French and English Periodicals) to visit a country so favoured by nature and so richly adorned by the cultivation of the arts and sciences, and above all blessed by the possession of a free constitution. After surmounting many difficulties interposed by religious and national distinctions and other circumstances, I am at last opposite your coast, where, however, I am informed that I must not place my foot on your territory unless I previously solicit and obtain an express permission for my entrance from the Ambassador or Minister of France in England.

3rd. Such a regulation is quite unknown even among the Nations of Asia (though extremely hostile to each other from religious prejudices and political dissensions), with the exception of China, a country noted for its extreme jealousy of foreigners and apprehensions of the introduction of new customs and ideas.

I am, therefore, quite at a loss to conceive how it should exist among a people so famed as the French are for courtesy and liberality in all other matters.

4th. It is now generally admitted that not religion only but unbiased common sense as well as the accurate deductions of scientific research lead to the conclusion that all mankind are one great family of which numerous nations and tribes existing are only various branches. Hence enlightened men in all countries feel a wish to encourage and facilitate human intercourse in every manner by removing as far as possible all impediments to it in order to promote the reciprocal advantage and enjoyment of the whole human race.

5th. It may perhaps be urged during the existence of war and hostile feelings between any two nations (arising probably from their not understanding their real interest), policy requires of them to adopt these precautions against each other. This, however, only applies to a state of warfare. If France, therefore, were at war with surrounding nations or regarded their people as dangerous, the motive for such an extraordinary precaution might have been conceived.

6th. But as a general peace has existed in Europe for many years, and there is more particularly so harmonious an understanding between the people of France and England and even between their present Governments, I am utterly at a loss to discover the cause of a Regulation which manifests, to say the least, a want of cordiality and confidence on the part of France.

7th. Even during peace the following excuses might perhaps be offered for the continuance of such restrictions, though in my humble opinion they cannot stand a fair examination.

First. If it be said that persons of bad character should not be allowed to enter France: still it might, I presume, be answered that the granting of passports by the French Ambassador here is not usually founded on certificates of character or investigation into

the conduct of individuals. Therefore, it does not provide a remedy for that supposed evil.

Secondly. If it be intended to prevent felons escaping from justice: this case seems well provided for by the treaties between different nations for the surrender of all criminals.

Thirdly. If it be meant to obstruct the flight of debtors from their creditors : in this respect likewise it appears superfluous, as the bankrupt laws themselves, after a short imprisonment, set the debtor free even in his Own country; therefore voluntary exile from his own country would be, I conceive, a greater punishment.

Fourthly. If it be intended to apply to political matters: it is in the first place not applicable to my case. But on general grounds I beg to observe that it appears to me, the ends of constitutional government might be better attained by submitting every matter of political difference between two countries to a Congress composed of an equal number from the Parliament of each: the decision of the majority to be acquiesced in by both nations and the Chairman to be chosen by each Nation alternately, for one year, and the place of meeting to be one year within the limits of one country and next within those of the other; such as at Dover and Calais for England and France.

8th. By such a Congress all matters of difference, whether political or commercial, affecting the Natives of any two civilized countries with Constitutional Governments, might be settled amicably and justly to the satisfaction of both and profound peace and friendly feelings might be preserved between them from generation to generation.

9th. I do not dwell on the inconvenience which the system of passports imposes in urgent matters of business and in cases of domestic affliction. But I may be permitted to observe that the mere circumstance of applying for a passport seems a tacit admission that the character of the applicant stands in need of such a certificate or testimonial before he can be permitted to pass

unquestioned. Therefore, anyone may feel some delicacy in exposing himself to the possibility of a refusal which would lead to an inference unfavourable to his character as a peaceable citizen.

My desire, however, to visit that country is so great that I shall conform to such conditions as are imposed on me, if the French Government, after taking the subject into consideration, judge it proper and expedient to continue restrictions contrived for a different state of things, but to which they may have become reconciled by long habit; as I should be sorry to set up my opinion against that of the present enlightened Government of France.

I have the honour to be,
Sir,
Your most obedient servant,
RAMMOHUN ROY

INDEX

A

- A Debate with Bhattacharya* by Rammohun Roy, 36
Abesenna, 63
Acosta, D', 114
Adam, J., 104
Adam, William, 45, 49, 51, 52, 62, 96
Akbar II, Emperor of Delhi, 108, 109
Albion (Ship), 110
American Independence Movement, 27
Amherst, Lord, 64, 65
An appeal to the Christian Public by Rammohun Roy, 43
Andrews, C.F., 6, 116
Anflosund des Wedant by Rammohun Roy, 33
Anglo Hindu School, 61
Aristotle, 12
Arnot, Mr., 97
Asiatic Journal, 36, 47
Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 35, 36
Ata, Wasil B., 12
Athenaeum, 10
Atmiya Sabha, 28, 29, 38, 61, 76, 78, 103
Auditor General, 93
Aurangzeb, 8
Avatarvad, 13, 21

B

- Bacon, Francis, 26, 64, 119
Bajra Suchi, 78
Banerjee, Gooroodas, 63

- Banerjee, Surendranath, 102
Baptist Mission, Seerampore, 39
Basu, Ramram, 69
Bathie, Francis, 76, 83
Batrisa Simhasana by Mrityunjaya Vidyalankar, 69
Bayley, W.B., 106
Bengal Gazette, 102, 103
Bengal Harkaru, 62
Bengal Spectator, 101
Bengal Spectator, 101
Bengali Prose, 5, 68, 69, 70, 71
Bentham, Jeremy, 26, 110, 112
Bentham, 26
Bentinck, Lord William, 66
Bhattacharya, Gangadhar, 103
Bhattacharya, Gowri Kanta, 27
Bible, 40, 41, 43
Blackstone, 26
Board of Control, 59, 93, 98, 99, 112
Bosh, Nanda Kishore, 29
Bourbon Kings of Naples, 4, 117
Bowring, John, 112, 113
Brahmo Sabha, 29, 51, 52, 53, 55, 70, 71
Brahmo Samaj, 29, 54, 55, 71
Brahmunical Magazine, 45, 46, 78
British Utilitarian Association, 112
Brougham, Lord, 112
Buckingham, James Silk (J. S.), 26, 104, 106, 117

C

- Calcutta Gazette*, 34
Calcutta Journal, 26, 43, 44

Calcutta Madrassa, 57
Calcutta Monthly Journal, 36
 Calcutta School Book Society, 70
Calcutta Times, 114
 Calcutta Unitarian Committee, 49
 Cambridge University, 65
 Carbonari, 117
 Carey, William, 18, 39, 40, 73
 Carpenter, (Dr.) Lant, 14, 43
 Caste System, 28, 78
 Ceylon, 83, 84
 Chakrabarty, Satish Chandra, 55
 Chakravarti, Tarachand, 52
 Charter of East India Company, 59,
 100, 109
 Chatterji, Bankim Chandra, 71
 Chatterji, Ramananda, 54
 Chaubay, Behari Lal, 30
Chicago Open Court, 49
 Child sacrifice, 9, 38
 Christ, Jesus, 41, 45
Christian Morality by William Roscoe,
 111
 Clive, Robert, 90
 Colebrook, Mr., 59
 College of Chemistry in England, 64
 Collett, Sophia Dobson, 13
 Congress Party, 82
 Conway, Moncure Daniel, 49
 Court of Directors, 58, 59, 60, 63, 65,
 74, 82, 83, 86, 87, 94, 100
 Cumberland, Duke of, 112

D

Deb, Chandra Sekhar, 52
 Deb, Radhakanta, 30, 52
Defence of Hindu Theism by
 Rammohun Roy, 35
 Defence of Hindu Unitarianism, 51
 Devonshire, Duke of, 112

Dewan, 8, 18
 Dharma Sabha, 52, 76
 Dhrupad songs, 70, 71
 Digby, John, 18, 25, 108
 Double Government, 8
 Duff, (Dr.) Alexander, 62
 Duncan, Jonathan, 66
 Dutton, R, 49

E

East India Company, 18, 39, 49, 57,
 58, 59, 82-85, 88-90, 93, 95, 99,
 100, 108, 109, 113, 114
 East, Sir Hyde, 60, 61
 Education Commission, 66
 Ellis, Mr. 35, 36
 Emerson, 33

F

Ferguson, Mr., 70
Final Appeal to the Christian Public
 by Rammohun Roy, 44
 Fletcher, Mr., 111
 Foreign Unitarian Association, 49
 Fort William College (Calcutta), 18,
 36, 68
 Fox, Mr., 49, 50
 Free trade, 82-86, 95
 French Revolution, 4, 27, 110
Friend of India, 42, 43

G

Gandhi, Mahatma, 5
 Gibbon, 26
Gita, 15
 Goswami, 30
Gouriya Vyakaran comp. by
 Rammohun Roy, 69, 70

Grand Jury, 99
 Grant, Charles, 59, 112
 Gregorie, Abbe, 33, 114
Gyananjan by Gowri Kanta
 Bhattacharya, 27

H

Halдар, Nilratan, 29
 Halhead, Nathenial Brassy, 70
 Hare, David, 60, 61, 62
Harkuru, 43, 44
 Harrison, J. H. 65
 Harun-Al-Rashid, 12
 Harvard University, 50, 113
 Hastings, Warren, 57, 90, 102
 Hayes, John, 104
 Hebber, Bishop, 65
Hickey's Gazette, 102
 Hindu College, 61, 103
 Hoogly College, 113
 House of Lord, 93, 112, 115
 Humanism, 2, 4, 72
 Hume, 26

I

Idol-worship, 1, 30, 34, 35, 36
 India Jury Bill, 98
 Indian College, 61
Indian Mirror, 55
 Indian National Congress, 94
 Indigo planters, 83, 85, 86; excesses
 of, 85
Introduction to Astronomy by
 Ferguson, 70
 Ishopanishad, 34, 37

J

John Bull, 76, 85
 Johnstone, Alexander, 84

Jones, Sir William, 59
 Joy, Charles R., 49
 Jung, Muhobad, 10
 Jury Act, 98
 Jury, trial by, 98

K

Kalitakar, 37
 Kathopanishad, 34
 Kena, 34
 Kirkland, Dr., 50
 Koran, 2, 12, 13
 Kulinism, 28, 77

L

Lama, of Tibet, 14
 League of Nations, 119
 Levi, (Prof.) Sylvain, 28
 Locke, 26
 London, 6, 33, 94, 100, 111, 112, 113,
 115; *Journal*, 26, 87; University,
 65
 Luther, Martin, 1, 3

M

Macaulay, Lord, 66, 67
 Macdonald, K. S., 14
 Mackenzie, Hall, 65
Madras Courier, 34
 Madras Government School, 34
 Madras Literary Society, 35
 Madras Literary Society, 35
 Maha Patsala, 61
 Mahanirvana Tantra, 78
 Mahmud, Shams-un-Nahar, 13
Maktab, 11
 Mandukopanishad, 34

Manu, 46
 Marshman, Joshna, 42
 Mazumdar, Braja Mohan, 29
 Medievalism, 1, 24, 80, 81; fight
 against, 72
 Melville, Mr., 93
 Metcalf, Charles, 106
 Mill, James, 26
Mimangsha, 15
 Minto, Lord, 59, 63
Mirat-ul-Akhbar, 103, 106, 117
Missionary Register, 32, 33
 Mitra, Brindaban, 29
 Mitra, Kishori Chand, 11
 Mitra, Peary Chand, 61
*Modern Encroachment on the Ancient
 Rights of Hindu Females
 According to the Hindu Law of
 Inheritance* by Rammohun Roy,
 77
 Monotheism, 13, 15, 21, 30, 33, 36,
 48, 52
 Montesque, 26
 Morelli, 117
 Morin, L., 114
 Muabidins, 12
 Mukherjee, Baidyanath, 60
 Muller, Max, 2, 114
 Mulunghees,
 Munster, Earl of, 112
 Mutazalis, 12, 13

N

Naidu, Sarojini, 116
 Native Hindu College, 61
 Nehru, Jawaharlal, 80
 Newton, Sir Issac, 26, 47
 Nobilibus, De Robertus, 35, 36

O

Owen, Robert, 112
 Oxford University, 65

P

Paine, Tom, 26
 Pal, Bepin Chandra, 80, 81, 96, 97
 Philippe, King Louis, 114
 Plato, 12
 Polygamy, 77, 78
 Portugal, 4
 Press Commission Report, 107
 Press Ordinance (1823), 104-106
 Press Ordinance (1828), 98
 Press Regulations, 104
 Princep, James, 59
 Princep, Toby, 59
 Pseudo- Vedas, 35, 36
Puranas, 15

Q

Quotations, 35, 107

R

Ranade, Mahadeva Govinda, 59
 Rathbons, William, 115
 Religious reforms, 6, 28, 31, 32, 34,
 50, 53, 72, 73
 Renaissance, 1, 60, 80
 Ripon, Lord, 66
 Roscoe, William, 111
 Roy, Braja Binod, 10
 Roy, Radha Prasad, 49
 Roy, Raja Rammohun

Birth, 9; early education, 11; studies Sanskrit at Varanasi, 14; religious beliefs, 14; serves as Munshi in Ramgarh, 25; goes to Rangpur, 25; sets up Atmiya Sabha (1815), 28; opposed by orthodox Hindus, 32; controversy with Christian Missionaries, 38-48; takes major step towards furthering cause of Unitarianism, 49; establishes Vedanta College (1825), 51; establishes Brahmo Sabha (1828), 61; sets up High English School, 61; strong advocacy in favour of education in sciences, 64; maker of modern Bengali prose, 5; social reforms, 72-79; mobilises public opinion against Suttee, 75; supports the right of Hindu Women to Property, 77; against Caste System, 78; father of Indian Renaissance, 80; views on salt trade, 82, 90; plea for justice for peasantry, 90; his burning passion for freedom, 96; first to initiate the Freedom Movement, 97; fight for freedom of press, 106; appointed as Imperial Envoy to the Court of England by Akbar II, Emperor of Delhi and conferred the title of Raja, 108; Visit to England, 108-121; a universal man, 116; death, 121

Roy, Ramaprasad, 62

Roy, Ramkanta, 10, 11, 14

Russel, Lord John, 115

S

Salt trade, 82, 90

Samachar Chandrika, 52, 76

Samachar Darpan, 45, 99, 100

Sambad Kaumadi, 85, 103

Sankara, 15

Sanskrit College (Varanasi), 58

Schmidt, Doecar, 42

Scientific Education,

Scottish Church College, Calcutta, 62

Seal, Brajendra Nath, 12, 15, 26, 79, 120

Second Appeal to the Christian Public by Rammohun Roy, 43

Second Defence of the Monotheistical System of the Vedas by Rammohun Roy, 36

Seerampore College Library, 29

Seerampore Missionaries, 39, 73, 99

Sen, Keshub Chandra, 48, 55

Shah, Alam II, 8

Shastri, Shankara, 24

Shastri, Subrahmanya, 30

Silvati, 117

Singh, Ranjit, 104

Sismondi, 114

Social Reforms, 5, 15, 29, 32, 38, 52, 72-79

Socinus, Faustus, 41

Spain, 4, 12, 117, 118

Spear, Dr. Percival, 5, 56

Sterling, Mr., 109

Sufi School, 12

Sussex, Duke of, 112

Sutherland, James, 113

Suttee, 28, 73-77, 114; Suttee Act, 109

T

- Table Bay, 110
Tagore, Debendra Nath, 54, 62, 71
Tagore, Dwarkanath, 29, 52, 86, 104, 106
Tagore, Gopi Mohan, 29
Tagore, Prasanna Coomar, 49, 52
Tagore, Rabindranath, 116
Tagore, Ramnath, 52
Talleyrand, 118
Talmud, 2
Tantras, 15
Tarkalankar, Mrithyunjay, 36
Testaments: New, 2,41; Old, 2
The India Gazette, 113
The Needle of Adamant, 78
The Precepts of Jesus by Rammohun Roy, 40, 41, 111
The Unity, 49
Thoreau, 33
Trinitarianism, 47
Trinity, 41, 46, 47
Tuhfat-ul-Muwahiddin by Rammohun Roy, 14, 18, 21, 24, 25

U

- Ubaid, Amir B., 12
Unitarian Association, 49-53, 62
United Nations, 119
Universal Church, 55
Upanishads, 2,3, 15, 16, 27, 28, 31, 32, 52, 69
Urqhurt, W. S., 62

V

- Vedanta Chendrika* by Mrithyunjay Tarkalankar, 36

- Vedanta College, 51
Vedanta Grantha by Rammohun Roy, 36, 69
Vedanta Sastras, 15
Vedanta, 3, 15, 16, 27, 28, 30-33
Vedantasar by Rammohun Roy, 31, 33
Vedas, 2, 29, 30, 31, 34, 35, 36, 46, 51
Venkata Ratnam, R., 5, 55
Vidyabagish, Ram Chandra, 52
Vidyabagish, Utsabananda, 29
Vidyalankar, Mrityunjaya, 69
Vidyalaya, 61
Vidyasagar, Iswarchandra, 71
Volney, 26
Voltaire, 26, 62

W

- Wellesley, Lord, 104
White Hall, 109
Wiberforce, Mr., 58
Widow, Hindu, remarriage, 28
Widows burning, 74, 76, 110
William IV (King), coronation of, 112
Williams, Horace Hyman, 75
Wilson, H., 59
Women, Hindu, right to property, 28, 77
Woodforde, John, 25
Woodforde, Thomas, 18
Wynn, Mr., 98

Y

- Yates, 45
Yeates, William, 39
Yoga-Vashisht, 16
Young, J., 110

Raja Rammohun Roy's intellect, enriched by encyclopaedic erudition, informed by rational humanism and universal outlook, converged to steer synchronously a renaissance and a reformation in the dark ages of Bengal. Rammohun, being a visionary, joined hands with enlightened individuals to lay the foundation of a Modern India. He wrote voluminously on varied issues of his times, like society, economy, press freedom and religion besides translating many of the Upanishads in Bengali and English. He was also a critic of the unjust actions and policies of the Colonial Government in India. This biography captures the life of the Father of Modern India succinctly.



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